

Zansetsu: The Lingerin9 Snow

by Gabi-hime

Category: HakuÅ•ki/è-„æ;æé¬¼

Genre: Drama, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Chizuru Y., Saito H.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-03-27 08:05:26

Updated: 2012-06-26 06:24:33

Packaged: 2016-04-26 20:24:20

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 32,410

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: He was like snow that lingered out of season, the sinister heretic, Saitou Hajime. Hakuoki: Shinsengumi Kitan. Saitou Hajime x Yukimura; Okita Souji Yukimura friendship.

1. Prologue: To Live is to Die

****_Zansetsu_: _The _Lingerin9 _Snow_****

Hakuoki: _Shinsengumi _Kitan_ (_Game_)_

**_Saitou _Hajime _x Yukimura_; _Okita _Souji
Friendship/ _Devotion _Route_**

By ****GabiHime **_**at **_**gmail **_**dot
com****

****Changelog****

The nature of this story means that sometimes I will write chapters out of order and then make systematic edits as needed. Check here to find out which chapter is newest, and what changes have been made.

June 25 2012** - Most Recent Chapter: Every Muscle in Your Body Sings - I have recently begun playing Hakuoki Zuisouroku and I have been so charmed by the events so far that I am reworking the early parts of Zansetsu to include them. Part of the chronologically next chapter has been written, but before it is posted I intend to cover the scenes in Zuisouroku that I have skipped. This current chapter features a scene from Shinsengumi Kitan that I was uncertain how to write at the time I came to it, so I skipped over it. I hope you will enjoy it!**

****Author****'****s ****Foreword****

I am a great fan of Japanese historical romances, and have a particular interest in the Bakumatsu period and the drama which surrounds the group of men who called themselves the Shinsengumi. In a romantic historical context, one which places the members of the Shinsengumi as larger than life folkloric heroes like John Henry, Jesse James, and Robin Hood, I really find them difficult to beat for appeal. Hakuoki is a work of fiction and Zansetsu is also a work of fiction. I will strive to be historically accurate in my construction of events, but I will not be a slave to history in determining how I chart the course of this story. Unlike Alexander Dumas, I feel that my musketeers do not necessarily need to bow their heads to history.

The Saitou Hajime and Okita Souji that appear in the pages of this work are not meant to be representative of the actual historical figures, nor are their choices meant to be indicative of the choices of the actual historical figures. These are fictional characters as presented by Fujisawa for Hakuoki that I am tormenting to my heart's content. Strictly speaking, the historical Saitou and Okita were probably not actually rasetu.

This story is based on the continuity established in the Hakuoki game series, as opposed to the Hakuoki manga, anime, or light novels, and primarily follows the Saitou Hajime route, although not without some deviations. Like the game itself, it is meant to be a series of vignettes or connected recollections, as opposed to a continuous narrative.

You will find that the heroine of this story is not Yukimura Chizuru, but is in fact a girl named Yukimura Kazuki. Although Chizuru is the recommended (and accepted canonical) name for the girl who is apprehended by the Shinsengumi in late January of 1864, the fact that Hakuoki still gives you the option of choosing a name for the heroine makes me feel it is generally acceptable for me to change her name. Her circumstances are entirely the same: she is a girl from Edo, raised by her father Kodo, and a pureblood oni of the Yukimura clan who comes to Kyoto seeking news of her father, a doctor who has been incommunicado. Kazuki's personality is somewhat different from Chizuru's as it is depicted in the game, and her choices are different as well. While I harbor no dislike for Chizuru, playing through the game I often felt like the things I most wanted to change were Chizuru's actions, her thoughts and feelings, and her expressions of such. Honestly, Chizuru is not my ideal heroine. I feel that her heart is in the right place, but I find her terribly inactive and passive, someone whom things happen to, as opposed to someone who makes her own choices and causes things to happen. In creating Yukimura Kazuki, I hoped to bring to life a heroine who is by no means perfect, but who is more in line with my ideal of a shoujo heroine: a girl with the power to warp history with only willpower and niceness as her weapons.

Don't worry. This is not a story where everybody dies at the end. I don't write stories like that.

****TLDR****: **This is fiction, not history, based on the games and not the anime. The heroine's name is Kazuki. Nobody dies a tragic early death from tuberculosis. If you are looking for something different than this, best try someplace else.**

Prologue****:** ****_**To **_**Live **_**is **_**to**

****__**Die**_**

Late January, 1864

The 29th day of Shiwasu, the 12th month,
Bunkyu 3, Hour of the Boar

In the vicinity of Shijou-douri, central
Kyoto

To be alone in the heart of an ancient city is to truly be an outcast. In the wilderness, in the lonely mountains, or on the lip of an unnamed sea, it is possible to feel a greater solitude, but this is conceptual solitude, abstract because it is so absolute. In the absence of others, the pain of solitude becomes vague and dull, a chronic ailment accepted as a basic element of existence.

But to be absolutely alone among the mad throng of humanity is animal solitude, a primal fear, something suffered in the guts and the bone as opposed to the folds of the mind. She was in the bowels of an old city of wood and earth, and the time of comfort under the warming sun had passed away, leaving her chilly and friendless: a silent, solitary traveler. There was no one in this city of hundreds of thousands who even knew her name.

It had become very late.

At this hour in Edo she would have already dressed for bed, said goodnight to her father, blown out the lamp and snuggled up next to Taro in her futon. She was not in the habit of walking the streets of the city after dark, because even in Edo this was not safe for a girl on her own. She could not even pretend that she would be safe with Taro beside her, although he was a very good dog: brave, alert, and unswervingly loyal.

And Taro was not here. She had left him in Edo with Old Man Tanizaki, with the thinking that he was safer at home than wandering with her around a city that neither of them had ever been to. It had been difficult to get Taro to stay with Tanizaki, although he generally liked the old fellow well enough. He had been insistent on following his mistress wherever it was she intended to go, and although he was normally very obedient, in the end she had had to tie him to the porch of Tanizaki House, trusting that he would have the graciousness in his dog heart to forgive her of this gross injustice when she returned from Kyoto.

"Besides," Yukimura Kazuki reassured herself, "There ought to be someone there to welcome father home if he returns while I'm away."

The thought of her father returning home to a dark, empty house pained her heart. He was her father, and besides that, her only living relative. She had led a relatively sheltered life, and it was no exaggeration to say that her father was the sole focus of her love and attention, with the exception of her beloved dog. She simply had no close, personal relationships with anyone else, although she had a fairly wide circle of acquaintances in Edo, due to the fact that she often assisted her father in his work as a doctor. Even the Tanizaki family were simply kind people from the neighborhood who were willing to look after Taro.

It was because of this lack of other friends and guardians that the absence of her father weighed so heavily on her. When the letters had stopped coming regularly, she had had nothing else to distract her from her constant, and sometimes fantastic, worries. Although she was used to him being gone for a few days at a time on business, or being away for the afternoon, or locking himself in dispensary for hours as he worked, he had never been away from her for so long with no word.

Perhaps it was her lack of friends and guardians that made it so easy for her to leave Edo for Kyoto, once she had decided to do so.

There was simply no one to tell her that it was a dangerous idea.

"It's because I couldn't wait any longer," Kazuki insisted to herself, a reaffirming statement to give herself courage, and surety of purpose. "It's been too long. Something has happened and I must find out what. Taro will understand, my father will understand, and surely I'll find him soon, and he'll be safe and in good health, and I'll stay with him here until his business is finished and we can both go back to Edo together."

Kazuki was in the habit of having these sorts of long, spoken conversations with herself because she was used to being left to her own devices, with only Taro for company. She was also accustomed to giving herself inspirational talks when she was worried about something, and commonly faced down troubles by looking around herself for the wonders of everyday life to buoy her spirits up.

As she had spent most of her life in the company of her father, who rarely criticized her, whatever she chose to do, and Taro, who _never_ criticized her, she had grown up with the conception that it is not particularly strange to spend one's time talking to one's self, or to one's dog.

She often chatted to him about her hopes and her troubles, and now that he was not here, she found herself to be her only willing conversational partner.

But more than simply a way to pass the time, having a pleasant conversation with herself made Kazuki feel a little less afraid, and a little less alone.

It was very late, and Kyoto was an old city.

It was late enough so that it was no longer safe to be on the street, although it was questionable whether it had been safe even during the daytime. Kyoto was the city of ronin, and one of the seats of civil unrest. In this city, men died in the street everyday, the victims of brawls, attempted arrests, and casual violence. However safe the streets might have been under the watchful eye of the sun, certainly they were _less_ _safe_ now, but Kazuki remained on the street, trying to walk with purpose, but ultimately wandering haplessly and aimlessly. She had no other place to be than the streets; she had no place where she belonged. She had some money that she had carefully saved for her trip, and this might have bought her a place to belong, at least for a few nights, but she was wary about spending it because she could not honestly estimate how long it would take her to find

her father. Besides, her unfamiliarity with the city left her with no knowledge of where she ought to seek lodgings. Although she passed the open doors of many inns, she wandered by them as if their warm hearths had nothing to offer her, as if she already had a safe home and familiar arms to welcome her. If she had come to Kyoto with a heart full of good wishes, expecting to find her father in one afternoon, whole and in good humor, she had been disappointed.

She had not found him, and the home she had expected to be a safe haven in this unknown city, that of family friend Matsumoto-sensei, had been dark and lonely and closed.

She had arrived in the city in the early afternoon; it felt like she had walked its width and breadth searching for signs of her father as the day slipped away from her. Her legs were sore, her feet were sore, and even her toes were sore, because she had done more walking in the last few weeks than she was used to. Now, with the sun hid away and the lonely night all around her, she found herself without a place to stay, without a place to sit, without a place to sleep, and with no familiar (or unfamiliar) arms to welcome her.

Simply because she had no place to rest, and was still thinking on what to do, she kept walking, as if she expected to meet her father around the next corner. She had no intended destination, but she felt that at least if she kept walking, she was doing something, which felt at least a little better than doing nothing at all.

But at last she slowed reluctantly, and came to a halt in the street, folding her arms across her chest.

She sighed. "I know I'm being childish. I really ought to stop and find a place to stay. I can't very well sleep in the street, and even if I wanted to I'm sure someone would come by and arrest me if I tried. I've got to be sensible. I've got to be an adult! I'm not going to have an easy time finding my father if I'm in jail for vagrancy. After all, accommodations aren't just going to turn up in front of me like early spring flowers."

As she stood still in thoughtful contemplation of her immediate future, Kazuki moved from a state of aloneness to a state of not---altogether---aloneness, although she did not realize this immediately, being very intent on the consideration of her own troubles.

"First night in the city, eh boy?" came an unexpected question, and Kazuki looked up to find herself being addressed by a tall, husky man with his hand laid carelessly over the hilt of his sword.

"Oh, yes," she answered absently, because by nature she was genuine and truthful. It did not often occur to her that she ought not to be until after she had already spoken. This was one of those times she began to immediately regret her forthrightness as she uneasily realized that the man in front of her was not alone, but that she now had the attention of three unkempt men with swords belted at their waists. They smelled of the street, and of liquor. "I mean, no! Oh no, of course not," she haltingly attempted to cover her own blunder. "I'm from. Um. Here," she finished awkwardly. Her natural honesty came at the cost of natural cunning. She was a terrible liar.

Her eyes swept them briefly, gauging how her response had affected

their intentions. Although she was not world-wise, she was quite perceptive, when something had the focus of her attentions. Her palms tingled.

"You'll please excuse me," she bowed briefly and politely, hoping to put them off of her with a show of deference, "I didn't mean to get in your way. I shouldn't have been standing still in the middle of street. Don't mind me."

She hoped that modesty and courtesy would be enough to flatter them into leaving her alone. She was dressed simply and masculinely, with dark her hair pulled back into a topknot, and a sword at her own waist, so she did not think they had discerned her gender, and this provided her with some measure of comfort. She did not think the men before her would balk at assaulting a lone girl due to their heavy consciences. The tall man had called her 'boy' and set the mood for their encounter, and for this, she was grateful. She was gambling that a respectful apology might win her safe passage away from them, as she did not imagine she looked like she had anything of value on her person.

The second man spoke, taking a half-step toward her. "You seem like you're not a bad kid, so I'm going to stake you to some good advice. The streets are dangerous at night."

Kazuki took a half-step backward as he advanced, and did her best to seem calm and humble, although as she felt her situation rapidly deteriorating, her words came out faster than she intended, tumbling out one after another: "Oh, they are? Of course they are. Thank you for the warning. I'll just go now, go away, to someplace safe. Thank you again."

The third man moved to cut off her retreat down the street. Her eyes shifted uneasily, as she tried to gauge her surroundings, and the likelihood she would receive aid from an outside source. She was now boxed in on three sides. There were other people on the street, because it was a busy street, even at night, but no one who passed by seemed willing to look at her now. The only people who would look at her were the three men who had her cornered. The tangled life of the city rolled on around her, careless of her unease and discomfort. If she was about to be robbed and assaulted, the saddest truth was that no one seemed particularly interested.

Kazuki let her hand drop to the hilt of her kodachi, trying to find a calm place of stillness in her trembling heart. If she panicked, they would be on her like a pack of wild dogs. Perhaps there was still a way to salvage the situation.

"You sure you know how to use that, kid?" the second man spoke again, and this time his tone had a definite edge of menace.

"That's a nice looking sword," broke in the tall man, edging a little closer, his fingers curling around the hilt of his own sword. "Too good a sword for a kid to be carrying around. Let me tell you what I think you ought to do. I think you ought to hand it over to us, because we're patriots."

"And patriots deserve good weapons, right? Hand it over," ordered the third man, his voice low and threatening. "It'll get good use, brat. Don't worry that it'll get good use."

They had been gradually moving in, closing the net on her. She hadn't expected that, that the sword would draw their attention and their ire. She had expected that wearing the sword would help keep her out of trouble, not get her into it, as she had very little experience with the world. She had not understood that the act of wearing the sword on her waist marked her as a combatant, rather than as a civilian, and although this might have dissuaded some unsavory parties from hassling her, it attracted others.

No matter how much they wanted it, no matter how they threatened, she could not give the kodachi up. It was a family heirloom, and a precious memento of her barely remembered mother, a slender thread connecting her with the murky, dreamlike past. Even if she had been willing to give it up, she doubted that the men would let her go without searching her for other valuables, and such a search would inevitably reveal the truth of her gender and land her in a much more difficult situation.

She had a limited set of actions to choose from, and none of them were safe, positive choices.

"In that case," she could hear her kenjutsu instructor saying, clearly and deliberately, "Choose the option that's _least __worst_."

She ran.

* * *

><p>Perhaps the fact that she had called, "Thank you very much, goodbye!" all in one breath without turning back caused them a moment of confusion, because it was at least six seconds before she heard swearing and the terrifying scrape of steel on steel as they drew their swords.<p>

Although she heard their heavy feet thudding the hard-beaten ground behind her, she did not look back, knowing that she would be caught if she wasted the time to do so. She ran like an animal, one whose only defense is to flee and to hide. She could use the sword at her waist, was relatively confident in her ability to handle it in her own defense, but she was by nature gentle and soft-hearted. Practice with a shinai in a kenjutsu hall is different from a wild exchange of blades in the street. Kazuki did not want to hurt anyone, and was honestly unsure that she could, even if that person very obviously wanted to hurt her.

So she ran, dodging through the unfamiliar maze of alleys, trusting in her instincts to guide her, desperate not to run into a dead end. She ran as if her life depended on it, as it likely did, and she was a zephyr, or perhaps they had already had too much to drink before cornering her on the street, because she managed to put enough distance between herself and her assailants that she had the luxury of slowing to take in her surroundings as she came upon a crossroads. She couldn't keep up her dead sprint much longer anyway.

_Choose __the __least __worst __option__._

Hide.

She needed to find a place to hide and then trust to fate that they would lose interest in her and look for easier prey elsewhere.

She found her hiding place in a blind alley so narrow she had to sidle into it, pressing her body against the old wooden wall. She hunkered down, hiding in the deep shadows afforded by some planks of wood that had been stored in the small space between the two buildings. Two alleys crossed one another immediately ahead, and she hoped that the hostile ronin would storm angrily down one false trail or another rather than carefully search their surroundings for her bolt hole.

Once she had hidden herself she did her best to calm her wild heart, to slow her breathing, to erase her presence from the alley, counting quietly to herself at first, and then trying to think of nothing at all but the careful, slow repetition of null thoughts.

_I __am __not __here__. __No __one __is __here__. __There __is __nothing __here__. __There __is __no __person __here__. __No __one __exists __here__. __This __place __is __empty__._

Moment by moment, she let her self be erased from the alley.

But then the ronin were upon her.

They did not run past her hiding place in a furious rage as she had hoped they would. Instead they seemed to slow to a stop at the crossroads, swearing first indifferently, and then at one another. They were angry and apparently out of breath.

She was very still.

If she could just be still, then they would tire of looking for her and go away.

She would be still. She would be still.

As she hunched down, hugging her knees to her chest, trying to be very, very still, a strange presence crept into the alley with her and hung low, close to the ground. Her stomach, clenched tightly, spasmed uncontrollably, and she had to swallow back bile. Her blood rushed maddeningly in her ears and her saliva was cold and salty in her mouth.

Death had come.

She could not say how she knew, but she knew it had come. Death had come into the street and she was terrified.

She had been afraid of the ronin, afraid they would catch her and kill her, or perhaps if they were in a particular mood, rip her up and use her up, and then cut her up, or just leave her for dead on the street. But that had been a mortal fear, a mortal terror.

But this, this -

This was a horrifying, unnameable fear, a dizzying, insane terror.

It is coming.

_It __is __coming__. __It __is __coming__. __It __is __coming__. __It
__is __coming__._

_The __moon __is __naked__, _ is what she screamed to herself,
terrified and nonsensical, _And __he __will __see __all __of
__this__._

The sounds from the alley were confused: the brief noise of a
scuffle, half a scream, high and frail, that ended in a gurgle, and
then a series of wet, broken sounds, like a dull hatchet hacking wood
to pieces in a shallow stream. Indistinct shapes wavered past the
mouth of the alley, slipping by like trembling mirages. In the light
of the flickering lanterns, her only impression was of a pale, watery
blue, the color of the barren sky.

And then there was the smell.

She was the daughter of a doctor, a man who practiced western
medicine, one who cut up and sewed up the injured. For her, the smell
of blood was familiar, something she had learned to accept as a thing
that had to be tolerated to properly attend on the sick and
injured.

But this smell. _This __smell__.

It wasn't the smell of blood, sick and thick and tangy in the air, it
was the smell of all the other things: the mixed smell of excrement
and bile, the smell of the insides of things being torn outside,
being ripped and pulped and shredded; it was the palpable smell of
misery and despair.

Later he asked her, _Why __didn__'__t __you __stay __hidden__?_

She had no answers to that question, not at that moment, and not
later when he asked her, his arms wrapped desperately around her, as
if he feared this small shift of fate that would have erased her
presence from his life.

Kazuki had no reasons for her action, no string of logical
assumptions piled like dominoes against one another. She was simply
overcome with a desire to see what it was that had made the sick, mad
smell and the strange, confused noises. She had an undeniable desire
to look upon death, a dangerous fascination with that which both
repelled and terrified her.

Somewhere in her heart, she knew.

_If __you __look __upon __this __thing__, __you __will __surely
__die__._

She crept the the edge of the alley, and she looked upon it.

* * *

><p>It was an instant of recognition, and so much sensory overload
that her brain was nearly overwhelmed, and she was only able to
construct the scene for herself in parts that came together slowly in
that brief but endless span seconds when she crouched at the edge of
the alley, and she _saw __death__.

The ground was as sticky as tar, the dust dampened into a thick, squelching mud, but there had been no brief and unseasonal rain. The tarry mud was thick with blood, and there was blood spattered in a gory arc across the wall of building opposite her, blood and bits of things, chunks of things: brain matter and organ matter and small pieces of flesh. It was as if a human body had exploded in the alley, scattering a bloody mess of entrails and insides all over everything. There were some shapeless heaps on the ground, and some piles of moist, slippery, stringy objects that might have been waste from a butcher's shop.

And then there were the wraiths.

There were three of them, as white as bone and as pale as death, clad in gore-spattered haori that showed blue in spots no bigger than her thumbprint, the jagged blood-dyed trim of their sleeves and hem like the teeth of a flesh-eating ghoul. Two of them were hunched over the shapeless piles with naked blades, hacking and hacking at the inert fleshy bundles, sending fresh arcs of gore and bone matter as they worked, utterly heedless of the collapsed and dissolving state of their victims. The third wraith was closest to her, down on his hands and knees, his white face and hands smeared with blood as he shoved handfuls of dripping meat into his mouth, chewed them briefly, and then spat them out again.

And then the wraith looked up at her with wide eyes as deep as a shaft to hell, and it began to laugh.

It was a shrill, keening noise, high and remote and utterly inhuman. The only reason she thought of it as a laugh at all is because she had no other word to call it.

I am going to die, she thought, and it was the pitiful, helpless realization of a child who has just seen murder for the first time. I am going to die and they are going to eat me.

The wraith crawled toward her rapidly on his hands and knees, cackling to himself like a mad rooster. He reached out a bloody hand to seize her wrist and drag her out into the sick mess of the alley. She felt his fingers close around her arm like a bracelet of bone, and then it happened.

Time ceased to flow in a sensible way, with second coming patiently after second in an endless line. Instead, the moment when the wraith's fingers clamped around her wrist stretched out endlessly and soundlessly, as a dark shape flowed into the alley like a sudden, silent torrent of water. The strange, overwhelming silence of the moment was eerie, because before there had been sound, terrible sound, and afterward there was sound, but at that moment, in that queer, impossible span of time, there was no sound.

An endless second was utterly consumed by the time Kazuki managed to resolve the fact that the shadow that had appeared was a man, or at least a ghost or a devil who had taken a man's shape. He did not move like a normal human being, pushing off from the ground in easy, measured steps, his feet against the earth a simple cadence that one might have kept time by. Instead, he moved like a ghost, like a vengeful spirit, swift and terrible, and she never saw his feet touch

the ground, or heard the echo of his footfalls. He was simply in constant motion, his terrible inertia redirected impossibly and effortlessly. When he drew his sword it was in one brilliant motion, and although she knew it was there, she could not discern the outline of the blade itself, could only follow it in a series of three beautiful arcs, the white-hot line of the sword's movement burnt into her retinas like the shape of the sun.

And then he was very still, a dutiful, silent demon standing ankle deep in carnage, the moonlight on his resting blade turning it into a line of white fire. The three wraiths were dead, if they had been alive to begin with. At the very least, they no longer moved, and he looked around himself briefly, as if confirming this fact, and then she heard a soft hiss as he sheathed his katana.

He looked down at her then, on her knees in the mud made of blood and ichor, and his dark eyes were as blue as heaven, as blue as a sootless flame. He said nothing, only stared at her, his face expressionless, his mouth a thin line.

When the silence was broken at last, it was not by the blue demon, but by another, for suddenly they were no longer alone in the alley.

"Sometimes I wish you weren't so dependable, Saitou-kun," came a warm voice, half amused, half petulant. "You've gone and had all the fun without me, and left me with nothing to do. Now I just feel ornamental."

The other man that had appeared was taller than the blue demon, with hair that seemed ruddy in the torchlight. Even in the semi-darkness his eyes were a vivid green, and seemed to reflect light the way a wild animal's might.

"I do what is required of me," the blue demon answered quietly. "If you are worried you will miss out on your entertainment, Souji, then perhaps you should be quicker in the future."

"You're so cold," complained the green-eyed animal. He was also standing ankle deep in the bloody mess of the alley, in the midst of corpses, some so violated that they were shapeless heaps of naked meat. He was apparently utterly unconcerned, as if the bodies piled around him were a mundane and utterly unremarkable part of the scenery.

At last he followed the blue demon's line of sight and took full notice of her, crouched in the mud.

"Hmmm," he murmured, half to himself, "What's this then, Saitou-kun?" he asked, his mouth curving into a small, predatory smile.

"A witness," Saitou answered shortly, his eyes briefly flicking to the other man before returning to rest on her.

The green-eyed man let his hand fall to idly rest on the hilt of his katana and then casually voiced his opinion, "I don't think we can afford to have witnesses to this, do you?" He looked at the ground around his feet briefly before laughing. His words were warm and affectionate, but considering his surroundings, the sound was cold

and terrifying. "They really made a mess of things, didn't they?"

"Whether we can afford to have a witness or not is not up to us to decide," Saitou answered, and then he knelt down until he was closer to eye level with her, and offered his hand.

Kazuki stared at his hand blankly, as if she did not understand the meaning of it. She was paralyzed by the air of casual, brutal violence that still permeated the alley, like a mouse before snakes, or a rabbit before wolves.

At last, he said, "Take it," gently, as if he were explaining something simple to a very small child. "I'll help you up."

And then she awkwardly moved to take his hand, slipping in the bloody mud, and getting his offered hand grimy with the filth on her own. He was obligated to pry the dead wraith's fingers from around her wrist before he could help her stand, and he did so without comment and apparently without any difficulty, although she could not imagine that she had the strength in her own hands to free herself.

He led her out into the alley filled with blood, and then left her standing there, on her own two feet. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, again swallowing back the bile that had risen in her throat.

"She isn't much to look at, is she?" the green-eyed man observed, apparently disappointed.

Saitou looked at him blankly, then rapidly flicked his eyes from her to the other man as if attempting to formulate a suitable response.

"Not that it'd matter if she was," the other man observed philosophically as he shrugged, and she heard the quiet sound of steel as he thumbed his katana loose. "Sorry kid, but you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. My condolences."

Saitou threw his arm out in front of him in one smooth, fluid motion.

"Souji," he said slowly and deliberately, "We will wait to hear what the Vice Commander has to say."

The man he had called 'Souji' sighed a bit theatrically and then let his sword come to rest in its sheath again. "Saitou-kun, you can be such a house cat," he complained petulantly, as if perturbed his entertainment had been disrupted.

While they had been calmly discussing her imminent demise, Kazuki had at last come back to herself to some degree. It was not as if she had suddenly become accustomed to the murder circus of the alley, her mind had simply ceased to actively process information concerning the gore and piles of corpses and instead focused on the conversation the two men in blue haori were carrying on.

"Shinsengumi," she said softly, without thinking, for who else could they be, in their flashy blue haori with the jagged white trim. Even a sheltered girl from Edo had heard rumors of the band of thugs who

caused mayhem and committed murder while claiming allegiance with the Bakufu.

They both turned to look at her then, and the taller one smiled the way a wolf smiles, mirthlessly, and with intent.

"First Squad Captain Okita Souji," he introduced himself genially.

Saitou frowned very slightly. "Don't tell her things like that."

Okita offered his palms up helplessly, in an exaggerated admission of guilt, "Well, I'm awfully sorry, but now that she knows all about us, it really seems necessary that we kill her."

"Souji," came a short, sharp snarl, "I know I cannot account for your perverse personality, but please try not to calmly discuss murdering women in the middle of the street where anyone can hear you."

A third party had appeared suddenly at the crossroads, tall and dark-haired, and as graceful and beautiful as a dancer. This man was also wearing the distinctive blue haori that marked him as a member of the Shinsengumi, and he moved with such deliberate self-assurance that Kazuki was not at all surprised when one of the men in the alley greeted him.

"Vice Commander," Saitou answered immediately and differentially.

"I'm just trying to efficiently take care of the Shinsengumi's problems, Hijikata-san," Okita answered with a bland smile.

Hijikata's eyes swept the scene in one motion, and then came to rest on Kazuki, who stood shivering, smeared in muck, her arms wrapped around herself.

"Vice Commander," Saitou repeated himself, his voice low and quiet, "We have a witness."

"I'm sure he can see that, Saitou-kun," Okita chuckled to himself, "No worries, this time. It's a problem with a simple solution."

Hijikata frowned deeply, lines of frustration and anger marring his face. "Shut up, Souji," he said shortly. "I'm trying to think. And stop calling me 'Hijikata-san,' and 'Vice Commander.' We're supposed to be keeping a low profile."

Okita rolled his eyes very eloquently. "If we were supposed to be undercover, we probably shouldn't have worn our uniforms."

"Shut up, Souji," Hijikata repeated angrily, his brows still drawn tightly together. "Or I will tear your goddamned tongue out myself." He turned his attention to Saitou, "The situation?"

"They had frenzied," Saitou answered briefly, "They encountered some ronin at this location, and after dispatching them proceeded to desecrate the corpses." His eyes flicked down to the wraith he had

pried off Kazuki, and then he continued. "It appears that one of them was eating the flesh of the dead, or attempting to at least. I dispatched them just as they had located a fourth victim," he made a brief movement with his body to indicate that he meant her. "Our witness," he pronounced at last.

Hijikata continued to frown, as if he found the entire situation to be excruciatingly frustrating. "What did she see?" he asked darkly and Kazuki trembled.

Saitou let his eyes rest on her briefly and expressionlessly for a moment, and then spoke. "I cannot say. I can only suggest that you ask her." He looked down at the corpses that were piled around their feet. "What shall I do with the bodies, Vice Commander?"

Hijikata clicked his tongue, "Strip the haori off of them. I'll send the inspectors to handle the rest."

Saitou immediately set to work, and Hijikata turned his attention to Kazuki, who had, up until this point remained silent after her initial worrying revelation.

"What were you doing hiding in that alley?" he asked her, his brows drawn and his frown deep.

"Hiding in that alley?" she repeated nervously, then tried to collect her thoughts so she could explain herself a little better. Everything she stammered out was confused and muddled because she was still in shock. "I was hiding," she tried to explain. "I was hiding because I was hiding. From people who were trying to find me."

Despite her nonsensical response, Hijikata nodded, as if he had a fairly clear picture in his head of the order of events that had led to her being covered in grime, crouched in the corner in the mud, hiding in the small space between two buildings.

"Vice Commander," Saitou prompted quietly as he stood, his arms loaded with the blood-stained haori, "We shouldn't remain here longer than necessary. We are in danger of being seen," his eyes moved briefly to Kazuki, "By other witnesses."

"Seems like it's time to take care of our problem," Okita declared cheerfully from where he stood with his arms crossed. He had watched Saitou strip the wraith corpses without offering any assistance himself.

Hijikata ignored this leading remark from Okita, and instead stared hard at Kazuki, at her dark hair, her small, pale face, and her grimy little hands.

"Vice Commander," prompted Saitou with quiet urgency.

"Fine," Hijikata barked, his voice low and dark as he turned his back on her, "We take her to Yagi House. Souji, bring her."

Saitou paused for a moment next to her, his arms full of bloodied linen and spoke softly. "You had best prepare yourself," he advised. "Whatever happens, it will not be easy."

And then he was gone silently after Hijikata.

Okita closed in on her before she had time to move even a step, and companionably laced his fingers through hers as if they might have been preparing to go on a picnic together, instead of standing in a field of blood. His grip was like steel, terrible and constant. He leaned in close to her ear, so she could hear his soft, pleasant voice.

"If you ever try to run from me, I will kill you," he said.

With some effort, Kazuki found her voice again, and poured all the courage she had into it. "I won't run," she said.

"Mmm," he murmured in response, and then seemed to be thinking about it, "That's almost too bad," he lamented lazily.

Yukimura Kazuki was spirited away that night by a company of demons, and they disappeared into the stillness leaving neither a ripple nor a trace.

2. 1864: The First Year: Early February

****1864****

****The First Year****

Early February

Accepted as a ward by the leadership of Shinsengumi, Yukimura Kazuki is allowed to live among them on the condition that she keeps out of the way and does not reveal her gender to the rank and file soldiers. In return, they offer their protection and assistance in her hunt for her missing father, whom they also wish to find, for reasons they will not reveal. Although Kazuki wishes to begin to search for her father at once, circumstances call the Vice Commander of the Shinsengumi, Hijikata Toshizou, and the Colonel, Sannan Keisuke, to Osaka. As Hijikata is the only person who can grant her permission to leave the Shinsengumi's compound to search for her father, Kazuki finds herself under house arrest, and so resolves to make the best of it.

3. The Seeds I've Sown

Zansetsu__**: **__**The **__**Lingering
__Snow**__

Hakuoki__: Shinsengumi Kitan__ (Game__)

Saitou Hajime x Yukimura__; Okita Souji
Friendship__/_Devotion Route

By Gabihime at gmail dot com

What **__Happened **__**to **__**the **__**Seeds
__I**__**'**__**ve **__**Sown**__

Early February__, 1864

Risshun, the 5th day of Mutsuki, the 1st
month, Genji 1, Hour of the Horse

Shinsengumi Headquarters, Yagi House, Mibu

Ultimately, in the grand scheme of things, life at the Yagi compound was not terribly different than her life had been in Edo, with her father, although she did miss the constant company of her dog. By and large she was left up to her own devices, and while she was advised to keep to her own room, she generally did not and found that she could get away with such behavior so long as she did not push her luck.

Kondou was always pleased to talk with her whenever he had a spare moment, and even sought out her company repeatedly, bringing her sweets and small treasures that he thought might please her. It was his earnest hope to make her general isolation a little easier to bear. He was so genuine and good-natured, it was easy to pass the time with him, and Kazuki found that she had already begun thinking of him as if he were a precious relative, like a beloved uncle or brother, rather than the commander of such a fierce and forbidding company as the Shinsengumi.

It was because she had struck up such a natural resonance with him, that she felt confident enough to ask him for a favor.

"You want to dig a garden?" he had asked, clearly surprised.

"Yes, sir," she had confirmed pleasantly. "That's what I'd like to do. I promise not to get in anyone's way. I'd just like permission to till some ground that no one's using to make a little garden."

"Yagi House has a big garden of its own," Kondou had assured her with a paternal pat on the shoulder, "And I promise that it is well taken care of. You don't need to think of doing something like that, Yukimura-kun. You're our guest, not a servant."

"Oh, I don't want a big garden," she laughed, swinging her legs back and forth over the edge of the porch. "And I don't want to bother the people who are working hard there. I just want a little garden to take care of myself. It's getting into planting time, you know, and I won't be able to plant anything in my little garden in Edo, so I thought, since I don't know how long I'll be staying here, I'd like to plant a little garden, to grow some flowers, and some herbs, and some small things."

"You like flowers?" Kondou asked warmly, a gentle smile on his face, as if he already knew the answer to his question.

"Naturally," she nodded, laughing. "Flowers are beautiful, but they're also very useful," she insisted, with one finger raised as if she had important information to impart, "Because they calm our hearts and make us happy."

"Take any place you'd like," Kondou declared with passionate admiration, "To grow your little garden."

And so she did.

* * *

><p>She made a little list for herself, thinking of the time of the year, and the seeds and the cuttings that might be available in the city, and after carefully counting out her money, she took the list to the man who had offered to assist her, should she require anything.<p>

She found him sitting quietly in the courtyard, at the base of a tree. At first she thought he might have been napping, as his eyes were closed, but as she approached, he opened them and regarded her silently.

"Have I disturbed you?" she asked, her head tilted a little to one side, and her hands, with her list and the few coins, clasped behind her back.

"No," Saitou said simply, although she obviously had. He observed her calmly for a moment, and then asked, "Do you have need of something?"

"A few things," she admitted, bringing the list and the coins from behind her back. "If it isn't too much trouble, I'd like it if you'd try to get them for me when you have the time," she asked shyly, a little embarrassed that she had to ask a grown man to be her fetch-and-carry.

He took the list wordlessly and scanned it thoroughly, as if he suspected that she had requested contraband goods.

"Seeds," he said at last, looking up at her impassively, and she nodded.

"Seeds," she confirmed, "Mostly. Some things grow from root cuttings though, not seeds."

"Why?" he asked, as if he required a verbal confirmation of her intentions.

"Because I'd like to grow a garden," she said seriously, roses blooming in her cheeks as she explained, "Because gardens are wonderful."

"Where do you intend to grow this garden?" he asked her, equally serious, "You are not allowed outside of the compound."

"In the courtyard," she nodded sagely. "I'm allowed in the courtyard."

She wasn't really, but as no one had explicitly forbidden her from being in the courtyard, she had taken this as a license she was free to go there as she pleased, so long as she did not get in anyone's way.

"You intend to dig up the courtyard?" he asked. His voice was still flat and even, but she could detect a note of dubiousness.

"Well, not all of it," she fluttered her hands in front of herself in self-defense. "Just a little corner of it. Kondou-san gave me permission," she hastened to add, like a small child insisting on rights because they have been promised to her. Then she paused to

look around herself, at the courtyard as it was, quiet and green, but dusty in patches. This was a place that everyone in the compound shared together. When she turned back to look at Saitou, she could not conceal a look of guilt and worry, "Do you think I will make people sad if I plant a garden here?"

He paused, as if thinking carefully on how to respond, "If the Commander has given you permission, then you are free to do as you like." As this did not seem to ease her troubles, he thought about it some more, and then said, "I cannot speak for anyone besides myself, but I am not unhappy. Plant your garden. It sounds interesting."

Her heart lit up at his words of quiet encouragement and she smiled as if all the wishes of her heart had been granted.

"You'll get my seeds for me, then?" she asked hopefully, offering the coins to him in her open palm.

He gently pushed her hand away with a brief brush of his fingertips.

"If Kondou-san has approved your garden, then it has become a responsibility of the Shinsengumi," he said simply.

"Wah?" she cried out unintentionally, then, seeing that he had had no discernible reaction to her outburst, attempted to reason with him, "But I've brought the coins and everything. It shouldn't be very expensive, but I'd like to pay anyway. The Shinsengumi is paying to keep me. The least I can do is pay for my own amusements."

Saitou was not moved. "The Code prohibits any member of the Shinsengumi from engaging in private activities to raise funds."

"But I'm not trying to give you money. I just want to pay for the seeds," Kazuki attempted to explain, half-pleading, half-flabbergasted.

He looked pointedly at the coins she was still attempting to give him and then asked gravely, "What is it you are trying to do?"

"Give you some money!" she insisted automatically, as if this answer ought to be obvious.

He said nothing, but simply stared at her.

She said nothing, and simply stared back.

At last she said, "Oh, I see," and felt very deflated.

Saitou shrugged off her disappointment, a slight move of his body.

"The garden that you grow will be the property of the Shinsengumi," he explained briefly. "Therefore it is logical that the Shinsengumi should fund its construction."

"You aren't going to take the coins, are you?" she asked, utterly defeated.

"No," Saitou admitted.

Kazuki sighed and then moved to sit down under the tree next to him. They were both silent for some moments, before he spoke.

"Do you require something else?"

"No," she answered, a little surprised. "I just thought it might be nice to sit here for a while." She tilted her head as she looked at him sidelong, a little nervous. "Am I disturbing you?" she asked shyly.

"No," he said quietly.

And so they sat together for a long time.

* * *

><p>Early _February_, 1864_

The 7__th __day __of __Mutsuki__, __the_ 1__st __month__,
Genji 1, __Hour __of __the __Snake_

_Shinsengumi __Headquarters__, __Yagi __House__, __Mibu_

Kazuki had been working to break the ground for her new garden for nearly two hours, both with the large wooden hoe and the smaller hand trowel, when she realized that she had an audience. Saitou was standing perfectly still and watching her as she worked, only his eyes shifting to track her movements. To see him so perfectly still while he watched her was a little unnerving, as if she had recognized a predator crouched low in the grass, waiting to leap upon her at the first opportunity.

His face was impassive, and it was not as if he gave any indications that he disapproved of her occupation, general personality, or continued existence, or that he had been given orders that required her immediate and unexpected termination - but his presence

-

Although he was still, he was not at rest, as if he expected to be beset by a thousand enemies even here in the seat of his strength and safety, on a peaceful spring morning, as she turned over the soil in her new garden. She could not say what Saitou Hajime was like when he relaxed, as she had never had the privilege of experiencing such a wonder. He had remained coiled and tense the entire time she had sat next to him under the tree in the courtyard until at last she had excused herself, certain that she was disturbing him, no matter what he might say. Whatever he was like when he was at rest, she could say with unquestionable certainty that he was _not _relaxed now. That was a little worrying, but more than that, it was sad. It was as if he lived his entire life as a bullet ready to explode out of the barrel of a gun.

Certainly he had always seemed so whenever she had seen him: passing time in the courtyard, in absent conversation with Okita, even at dinner time among his friends.

_I __suppose __he __doesn__'__t __take __anything __for __granted__,
_she thought, biting her lip. _But __that __seems __very __lonely

__to __me__.

Kazuki leaned her hoe up against one of the posts of the porch and turned to look at him with a friendly smile.

"Have you come to see my garden?" she asked hopefully. Nothing had been planted yet, but she had done a good job of turning over about half of the soil. The work was tiring, physically taxing, because the ground of the courtyard was hard, and had never been turned over before, but she knew it was a good spot, with just the right sort of light exposure.

"I came," he said slowly, his eyes shifting from her, to the hoe she had recently laid against the porch, and then back to her, "Because I heard you singing."

Kazuki flushed a little, because she had been singing, and even though it was something she did commonly when she worked, it was not something she had expected anyone to take notice of. She had sung her little nonsense songs to herself as she worked since she was a child.

She laughed to cover her embarrassment. "Oh that? That's not really singing, Saitou-san. It's just making little things up to make the time pass more easily. Everybody does that when they work."

His expression did not change, but he did incline his head the barest fraction, as if he was thinking on what to say.

At last he said, "In my experience, they do not."

She had a simple response to that. "Maybe they ought to, then," she said, turning her face up to regard the blue sky. "Singing is an easy way of sharing your feelings. When I plow the garden, I ask the help of the hoe, and I ask the help of the dirt, and I ask the help of the little green things that are going to grow here. With so much help, it makes even a hard job seem less difficult."

He studied the partially tilled earth, and then asked, "Do they help you? The hoe, the earth, the growing things?"

"Of course they do," she answered with confidence, and then gave him a warm smile. "That's why it becomes easier. I think most people and things are willing to help you, if you just ask them nicely. It gives a good feeling, I think, to help someone. That's why they like to do it, the soul of the hoe, the soul of the dirt, and the souls of the little things that will grow, I mean."

He did not immediately respond to this, but instead moved past her, and she turned around in a half-circle to follow his movement, worried that she might have said something to upset him, or that he had simply tired of her company. Instead he stopped at her back, by the hoe she had leaned against the porch.

"I think," he said slowly, his hand outstretched so his fingertips brushed the wooden haft of the hoe, "That I would like to try it."

She raised up her own hands and waved them ineffectually, "Ah, Saitou-san, you don't have to do something like that. It was my idea

to plant this garden, so I ought to do all the work."

He paused to turn to look at her, although his fingers had already closed around the haft of the hoe.

"You don't want my help?" he asked shortly, and although his expression had not changed at all, was still calm and serious, she felt, she thought, did he sound disappointed?

"Of course I want your help, that's not it," she insisted, her hands still fluttering in the air, then she realized how ridiculous she must have looked, arguing with Saitou over possession of the hoe, which he seemed to be unwilling to relinquish, regardless of her opinions. She took a deep breath and remembered her manners. "That is," she bowed very beautifully and respectfully, "I would be most honored to have your assistance, Saitou-san, but I cannot presume to impose upon your good nature."

"You haven't presumed," he answered, his words brief and to the point. "I have offered."

"But it's tiring to till up the soil," Kazuki protested doubtfully, "Doesn't the third squad go out today?"

"Tonight," Saitou corrected simply, his hands firmly around the haft of the hoe.

"Well then, I oughtn't let you," she said, reaching out to close the distance between them and take her own grip on the hoe. "You've got to go out tonight. You should be resting now."

He did not let go of the hoe, although she tugged on it to hint that he should. She might as well have been pulling against one of the porch posts for all it budged. He said nothing, and although she realized she would not be able to take the hoe by force or, apparently, by persuasion, she was stubbornly unwilling to let go of it herself, so they stood there, both of their hands wrapped around the haft of the hoe and stared at one another.

At last she sighed and let go of the hoe.

"You're very stubborn," she admitted helplessly.

At this his mouth curved slightly, a quiet smile. Seeing him smile, strange and slow and spare, she could not help but smile back, and her worries, such as they were, melted away.

He moved into the garden bed, where the soil was still hard and needed turning over, then turned his head to look at her over his shoulder.

"I don't intend to sing," he said simply, and then he paused, as if considering whether or not he should continue. At last he apparently decided, because he said, "You should sing, instead."

At this she laughed, and scrambled to collect the wooden hand trowel.

"Of course I will," she agreed, getting down on her hands and knees to dig in the dirt herself. "Because that will make it easier!"

And soon the little garden was filled with the sounds of work and the sounds of play, as Saitou and Kazuki tilled the soil together, and she trilled out her own little songs of labor and friendship.

* * *

><p>They had been working together for a while when they were interrupted by a curious third party.<p>

"Oi, oi, Hajime-kun, I didn't know you had decided to become a farmer," came an amused voice. "Or are you trying to dig a tunnel to the underworld?"

It was Okita, who had come sauntering along the porch, his arms folded into his sleeves. He stopped to appraise the fruits of their labors, and then shrugged, as if they were not altogether impressive.

"I am assisting Yukimura with the preparation of her garden bed. It is too difficult a job to leave to one girl alone," Saitou answered, although he did not pause in his hoeing, as if he were far too busy to stop and greet the first squad captain.

"I can think of someone who's going to be absolutely delighted when he returns from Osaka to find that you two have been excavating the courtyard," Okita chortled.

At this Saitou paused and turned to look seriously at Okita.

"She has Kondou-san's permission," he said shortly. "Why would the Vice Commander disapprove?"

"Because he is a killjoy who doesn't want anyone to have a good time," Okita shrugged, offering his palms up to the two of them, "But far be it for me to interrupt your honest efforts."

At Okita's pronouncement, Kazuki had gotten up off her knees to come to the edge of the porch, where she looked up at him, her face troubled.

"Do you think he really won't like it?" she asked, worried. "Do you think he'll be angry?"

"I think he'll be aggravated beyond belief," Okita volunteered cordially, an utterly delighted smile on his face, as if the idea of Hijikata's displeasure gave him a great deal of private joy.

Kazuki bit her lip, and turned to look at her little, half-finished garden plot with concern. Her knees were dirty with the earth from it, as were her hands, and the small hand trowel hung forgotten at her side.

Then she felt a light touch on her shoulder and turned to find that Saitou had rested his fingertips there: a brief touch, the momentary warmth of comfort and connection.

"Your garden won't make the Vice Commander unhappy," he said, an attempt at consolation, but then he was forced to admit, uncertainly, "Probably."

"Probably," she repeated, still glum, and sighed.

"Yukimura," Saitou began again, holding his hand out with an open palm, a gesture toward the little garden, "We may as well finish it, because it's already been begun. I am certain that the Vice Commander will not approve of us digging up a corner of the courtyard and then just leaving it there."

At this Okita laughed out loud, and sat down on the edge of the porch to survey the garden.

Then he extended a broad hand and patted her head, as if she were a dog or a small child. He said, "Go on and work in your garden, Kazuki-chan. If you grow something delicious, I promise to eat it."

At this, she smiled, goodwill and industry bubbling up inside of her so that her doubts were swept away.

"Of course, of course!" she agreed, waving her trowel around in delight. "I'll just have to work extra, extra hard to make sure that my garden makes Hijikata-san happy too!"

With a rekindled passions, and a belief that all was right with the world, Kazuki lost herself in the preparation of her garden, while Okita Souji observed and advised, and yet offered no actual assistance, and Saitou Hajime did his best to turn over the hard ground.

4. Every Muscle in Your Body Sings

__**Zansetsu**__**__: __**The __**Lingering
__**Snow**__

__Hakuoki__: __Shinsengumi __Kitan__

__Saitou __Hajime X __Yukimura__; __Okita __Souji
__Friendship__/__Devotion __Route__

__**By __**Gabihome __**at __**gmail __**dot
__**com**__

__**Every __**Muscle __**in __**Your __**Body
__**Sings**__

__February__, 1864__

__The__ 9__th __day __of __Mutsuki__, __the__ 1__st __month__,
__Genji__ 1, __Hour __of __the __Snake__

__Shinsengumi __Headquarters__, __Yagi __House__, __Mibu__

With the Vice Commander, the Colonel, and a portion of the men-at-arms gone to Osaka, Kazuki found that Yagi House was quiet, and at times lonely. Although Kondou did his best to stop in to see her as regularly as he could, to bring her small sweets or to inquire as to the progress in her little garden, he was a busy man, and doubly so since both Hijikata and Sannan were away in the field.

Kondou's activities kept Gen busy as well, as the older man tended to act as a chaperone for the passionate commander when cooler heads were otherwise occupied. And it was not only the commander who was often out on business. Heisuke, Shinpachi, and Sano regularly disappeared early in the day, even when they were not due to go out on patrol. The fact that they generally returned in the dead of night, and in tolerably good spirits, led her to suspect that were sneaking out to play and not to work.

Kazuki tried to keep herself busy, so the lack of companionship wouldn't get to her, but with the initial tilling and planting of her garden done, she had no choice but to simply let it grow on its own for a bit. She knew very well that she would do more harm than good worrying about in the garden when there was nothing to be done. Sometimes one had to exercise patience instead of industry.

Without Gen available to direct her to useful chores she could occupy herself with, she found herself without much to do. She puttered around idly with a broom for a while, sweeping imaginary dust off the porch that faced the inner courtyard, but at last she tired of this invented activity and retired to her bare room.

That it was bare was no indication of the Shinsengumi's poor treatment of her. Of course, they had provided her with everything they imagined she required, and she had a neat futon and comforter tidied away behind a sliding cupboard door. But when they were tidied away, the room was very bare.

This was not particularly surprising, as she had come to Kyoto with only her kodachi, the clothes on her back, and a little money, hoping desperately that she would be able to locate her father quickly and return to the familiarity of Edo, her own house, her room with its small collection of girlish childhood treasures, and her beloved dog. She had come to Kyoto with a determination to stay in the old city for as long as it took to find her father, but now as she sat looking at the bare walls in her empty room she had come to realize that finding him might take longer than she had ever anticipated.

Although she had only been at Yagi House for a little over a week, she had already planted a garden and begun to put down her roots. She was patient when the situation required it, even when it was very frustrating to be patient. The leadership of the Shinsengumi had promised their assistance in finding her father, and she had every confidence that they would make good on that promise, but even given her short time among them she had come to understand that they had quite a bit to do that bore no relation to the search for her father at all. They were busy men, and while finding Yukimura Kodo was designated a high priority, Kazuki had come to understand it was just one of the many high priority tasks the Shinsengumi concerned themselves with. As crises arose and were dealt with, the day-to-day priorities of the leadership shifted.

She would be patient and have faith in the men who had given their word to help her, but she no longer imagined that her return to her former life would come quickly or easily.

In the meantime, she sat alone in an empty room and thought about what she might have packed into a little box to bring with her from Edo to make the time pass a little more gently.

Still, there was no use wishing for horses. Her room in Edo might have been on the moon for all the likelihood that she would have access to it any time soon, and her room at Yagi House was comfortable, clean, and exclusively her own. While it might be bare now, soon enough she could fill it with flowers and the gradually acquired treasures of everyday life.

Fired with a new resolve, Kazuki left behind her a room that was no longer bare, but was simply waiting to be filled.

* * *

><p>Having collected the broom that had become her familiar companion, Kazuki had intended to spend the lunchtime hour engaged in further industrious sweeping, but when she came into the courtyard, she realized she was no longer alone there.<p>

Under a small tree that seemed to hold a particular appeal to one dark-haired and silent member of the Shinsengumi, she found Okita and Saitou lounging in the early spring breeze. This was perhaps not entirely accurate. Okita was most certainly lounging, with one knee up on the stone bench and his cheek propped against his fist, but Saitou was standing very still, as if even the act of casual conversation required the utmost of composure and careful vigilance.

If they had been speaking, she could not say what they had been speaking about, as their conversation seemed to have stopped before she had even noticed them sitting under the tree. Still, their silence seemed companionable and familiar as opposed to strained and abrupt, as if it were common for them to pass time together quietly. She found the stillness inviting, and so crossed the space toward them, her broom in tow.

Okita, who had been sunning himself on the bench like a cat, opened up one eye as she approached.

"It's the terror of the dustbunny, Yukimura Kazuki-chan," he drawled lazily, "Considering how you were brandishing that broom this morning, you must have a pretty poor opinion of our collective hygiene."

"Ah, no," she waved one of her hands in ineffectual denial, "I was really just looking for something to do. It's not that I think the place is particularly dirty or anything."

Yagi House wasn't actually, although based on her observations of the members of the Shinsengumi, she suspected this was because of the Yagi family, rather than because of the Shinsengumi themselves.

"If you're really looking for a big chore, then you should go sweep out Hajime-kun's room. It's really wretched," Okita advised judiciously.

The other captain did not long let that one lie.

"Souji," he began calmly, "That is untrue." Then his cool blue eyes flicked to Kazuki as he seriously assured, "I am very tidy."

At this, Kazuki could not help but laugh into a daintily curled fist.

Saitou frowned, nearly imperceptibly. "You do not believe I am tidy," he stated flatly.

"No, no," she hastened to explain, laughing, "I am sure you are very tidy, Saitou-san. I was laughing because I hadn't realized what good friends you and Okita-san are before today."

Saitou said nothing, but seemed to be considering something.

Okita spoke before he did. "I wouldn't be too sure of that," he interjected laconically.

Kazuki turned her head curiously toward him and found that he was still soaking up the sun, unperturbed.

"What do you mean?" she asked, honestly confused. Okita and Saitou were obviously friends, now that she stopped to consider it. They were often together, whether out on patrol, relaxing around the compound, or training in the training hall. They spoke together easily, and Saitou did not often seem bothered by Okita's often difficult-to-fathom jokes or his changeable temperament.

"Souji and I are not friends," Saitou clarified simply.

Okita shrugged without opening his eyes. "See? He's pretty heartless, isn't he, Kazuki-chan?"

"I cannot comment on that," Saitou answered, and did not appear to have any feelings on the subject. "I simply follow the way of Bushi, the way that I think is the correct way for a man to live."

"Wait for it," Okita advised, apparently amused. "Here it comes."

"Souji and I are not friends," Saitou explained simply. "We are comrades. A comrade you can trust is worth much more than a friend who is simply a person of acquaintance. I feel confident in battle when I have Souji at my back. Whether or not we like one another is irrelevant and inconsequential."

Kazuki thought about it for a moment, and then opined decisively, "But you do like one another."

At this Okita laughed unexpectedly, at last sitting up and putting both feet on the ground to look at her with his summer-green eyes.

"You are a shrewder customer than you let on, Kazuki-chan," he announced, "What makes you so sure?"

It was Kazuki's turn to shrug, as the truth seemed self-evident to her. "Saitou-san is very kind, but I doubt he'd spend so much time around you unless he actually appreciated your personality, Okita-san."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Saitou raise one hand to his forehead and look away, but she was immediately distracted by Okita,

who got to his feet and gave her a gentle knock on the head with his fist.

"I take it all back, Kazuki-chan," he said decisively. "I am now more convinced than ever that you are dumber than a stack of firewood."

"Ah," she cried out in surprise, and raised both her hands to the top of her head where Okita's fist still rested. In throwing her hands up, she also swung up the broom in her hands, and Okita stepped back and idly caught the bound bristles against his palm to keep her from further flailing.

Realizing she had almost caught the third troop captain in the face with her broom, she lowered it immediately, and apologized. Okita did not seem particularly worried, and relinquished his hold on the broom as she lowered it.

With her domestic weapon lowered, Okita scrutinized her.

"I've been wondering something since the first day I saw you, Kazuki-chan," he announced, and she felt her heart nervously skip a beat. He continued, "Not that it's my business what you do with yourself, but I can't say I have any idea why you go around with a sword strapped to your waist when you obviously have no idea what to do with it."

Her lightly fluttering heart felt immediately deflated, and she found she was soon waving one hand in denial.

"It was my mother's, and I do so know how to use it!" she protested. "I've had lessons at a dojo since I was very small." A little of her ire spent, she bit her lip. "I've never hurt someone with it, but I brought it with me to Kyoto because I couldn't bear to leave it behind. I always kept it with me, even in Edo."

"Ah," laughed Okita, faintly mocking, "So you're the famous swordswoman of Edo?"

At this, Kazuki could not help but put her hands on her hips and scold, "Of course not! Anyway, there isn't any such thing. You just made it up on the spot."

"Yukimura," Saitou interjected coolly, letting one arm come to rest silently between them to break off Okita's unrepentant teasing. "Is it true that you have taken training in the handling of a blade?" he asked seriously. "Not simply a wooden practice sword, but you have been trained with an actual sword, such as the one you carry?"

Kazuki forgot her earlier ire when confronted by Saitou's carefully worded question. She looked down at the kodachi on her waist and unconsciously, her body language changed. She let her hand fall to rest naturally on the hilt. It still felt good. The kodachi was an extension of her self. She didn't like to be away from it.

Saitou watched her simple, easy movements, and said nothing. Without her speaking, he had already ascertained what her answer would be.

"I have," she admitted, nodding so that her ponytail bobbed with her. He still said nothing, so she felt it was necessary to ask. "What are you thinking about?"

His eyes, which had been fixed on her hand, which fell naturally over the hilt of the kodachi, swept up to her face, and she found their blueness as remote as the far-off sky.

"Given our first encounter with you, we have taken it for granted that your skills regarding your own self-defense are zero," he said frankly and evenly in a way that made her heart sink and her cheeks flush with embarrassment. "But given this new information, perhaps a further assessment is in order."

"Why does it matter?" she asked a little weakly. As much as the kodachi was a part of herself, she did not relish drawing it.

"If I judge your self-defense skills are sufficient, I may recommend to the Vice Commander that you be allowed to accompany us on our daily patrols," Saitou answered, "I think it is highly unlikely that you will locate your father by staying under lock and key here."

Her heart jumped at this and she leaned forward eagerly. "Do you really think that I'll be allowed to leave the compound and look for my father? It's what I really and truly want to do."

"I cannot promise anything," Saitou answered flatly, "I can only ascertain my opinion of your fitness to be in the field, and then inform the Vice Commander of my opinions. I am not the one who makes such decisions."

Kazuki bit her lip. As much as drawing her sword outside of the dojo where she had trained for years made her nervous, she wanted very much to be allowed to go back into the city. Saitou was right in that she would not find her father while sweeping the porch or tending to her garden.

"All right," she said as she took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "What is it that you want me to do?"

Saitou stepped back a pace into the open courtyard and then smiled, bare and faint. "Draw your sword and try to land a blow on me. That is enough for me to gauge your level."

"I," she stuttered awkwardly, "I, I don't want to," she blurted out at last, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"Explain yourself," Saitou asked flatly. This was apparently a reaction he had not expected.

Kazuki took a deep breath and tried her best to explain. "I don't like to hurt people."

At this, Okita, who had been silently observing their exchange, chortled, "And you're worried you're going to hurt Hajime-kun? You really are the great swordswoman of Edo. And to think, I had no idea."

Kazuki turned to Okita with a look of consternation on her face. "A sword is a dangerous weapon, and not something that is meant to be

drawn lightly."

"Now you sound like a kendo master," Okita teased, "You'll start reciting practices to me next."

Saitou held up his hand to forestall Okita's teasing without taking his eyes off of Kazuki. "Souji, I am trying to have a serious conversation with Yukimura. Stop distracting her."

Okita shrugged as if he were very put upon, but fell silent.

Saitou continued. "You are correct in stating that in most circumstances, drawing a sword means taking your own life into your hands. To draw a sword, you must also be prepared to die." He stopped and considered her. "I am not certain that this is why you do not want to draw your blade."

Okita snorted again, unable to keep silent for long, "Of course it isn't. Didn't you listen to what she said? She's not afraid of getting killed, she's afraid she's going to kill you."

Saitou's eyes flicked briefly to Okita, and the other man shrugged again and subsided into silence. He turned his attention back to Kazuki, who still stood with her hand on the hilt of her kodachi.

"Is this really the crux of your concern?" Saitou asked seriously, with none of the sardonic incredulity that was so manifest in Okita's voice. He seemed neither surprised nor offended. He was simply gathering information.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," she confirmed shyly, her head bowed.

"Are you ashamed of this aspect of your character?" Saitou asked, his tone slightly sharp.

Her eyes snapped up as if he had struck her, and she stammered, "I'm not. I'm not ashamed."

His eyes softened a little as his smile curved briefly, a quiet moment of warmth, "Then do not bow your head." Then the smile was gone and he continued brusquely, "I make no judgements on the way you choose to live your life, but if you are so adamant about your desire not to hurt another, then there is no point in my considering your swordplay. If you do not have a willingness to kill if necessary, then you cannot possibly defend yourself."

"So I won't be allowed to go out on patrol with you?" Kazuki asked, her teeth pressed against her lower lip in worry.

"I will not recommend it, no," Saitou confirmed.

She balled her hands into fists again and thought hard about it. Both Saitou and Okita watched her without comment, Okita with one eyebrow raised, and Saitou in silent contemplation.

At last, she began a little haltingly. "The whole point of this is to tell whether or not I'll be able to defend myself at all, isn't it? In that case," she took a deep breath and then returned Saitou's

piercing gaze levelly, "In that case why don't you come at me?"

At this, Okita laughed out loud, throwing his head back. "Kazuki-chan just challenged Hajime-kun? If you want to die that much, I'm happy to oblige you. - "

"Souji," Saitou said shortly, and to the point, and Okita waved one hand idly in response, as if he wasn't particularly concerned about what the outcome to this proposed match might be, although he suspected it would end in Kazuki's grisly death.

"Yukimura," Saitou continued levelly, "I do not believe I am over-confident in my certainty that I could kill you."

If Saitou expected Kazuki to be cowed, she was not. "I am certain you are correct," she admitted, "But isn't that true of most members of the third troop?" She shook her head. "I don't believe you actively try to kill your men every time your practice with them in the training hall. I'm not willing to believe everything I hear about the Shinsengumi anymore," here she smiled, slowly gaining self-confidence. "I'm not proposing that I win some kind of match with you, but if I can survive even one blow from Saitou Hajime-san, I won't be doing so badly, will I?"

"Yukimura," Saitou answered flatly, "If you draw your sword against me, I am confident that I can disarm you before you could injure either yourself or, in some unlikely instance, me, no matter your years of practice. If I draw my blade on you, then I am depending on some as-yet-unforeseen ability of yours to keep you alive." He paused and slowly took stock of her before speaking. "I am reluctant," he said.

Kazuki frowned, then turned her head to regard the other man who was standing and watching them.

"Then I'll ask Okita-san," she announced.

Okita grinned like a maniac, his eyes narrowing gleefully even as his hand fell to the hilt of his katana, "I can't tell you how obliged I'd be, Kazuki-chan."

Before Okita could move forward, Saitou had stepped between them. Saitou frowned very slightly, then shook his head briefly, as if clearing it.

"I will do it," he said shortly.

"Hajime-kun always spoils all the fun," Okita complained, "You know I wouldn't have killed her _immediately_."

Kazuki was inwardly relieved that her gambit had paid off. She was not confident that Okita would hold back against her even the slightest bit, while she was sure that Saitou would handle himself seriously, but with a care to the fact that he was not facing an opponent of equal skill. Okita insisted that each time he made a threat on her life, it was only a joke, but she was still not entirely sure when he was joking and when he was serious.

"Maybe I ought to have a go if you survive Hajime-kun's test," Okita suggested, a little of his catlike anticipation resurfacing.

Saitou waved a hand behind him once, briefly, dismissing this possibility from the table, but he kept his eyes levelly on Kazuki. "I'm not going to give you any warning when I come," he advised simply.

Kazuki nodded once, without responding, and taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes.

She heard Okita's low chortle, but more than that she felt Saitou's presence, immediate and overwhelming, and her eyes snapped open reflexively as she stepped backward lightly, feeling the hot breath of Saitou's sword as it cut through the air near her neck, she had turned her body as she stepped backward, and even as her weight came to rest on that foot, she was stepping backward again, swinging her left foot fluidly behind her right foot to pull herself out of range of the viper-like hiss of steel. She moved without thinking, for movement in such a time is not a sequence of meditation, decision, and action. She had a natural concept of the space around her, of the space that Saitou occupied, that he rent with the blade of his katana, and of the possibilities open behind her. She did not have to see them and consider them. She understood the ground as an extension of herself, calm and thoughtless. Her third step back was a spring to land on her right forefoot, but even as she swept her left foot behind her to pivot again, she felt his reaction to her movement, as he understood what she meant to do. Her left foot skidded out from under her as her concentration broke, and she landed unexpectedly on her bottom, with the cool steel of Saitou's katana a brief bite of fire against her neck.

There was the punctuated, rapid movement of Saitou resheathing his katana, and then he was down on the ground next to her, pulling the scarf from around his neck as he pressed the cloth against hers. The whole situation confused her, so she found herself laughing nervously.

"I'm all right," she protested, "I suppose it's pretty embarrassing to slip and fall like that - "

"Forgive my carelessness, Yukimura," Saitou interrupted her rambling curtly, a handful of scarf still firmly pressed to her neck. "I have cut you. The responsibility is all mine. Lie still." His eyes flicked up to Okita who was watching the weird tableau with a strange mixture of shock, distress, and delight. "Souji, bring bandages. A neck wound that bleeds is serious."

Okita let his eyes rest on them a for a fraction of a moment longer, then he was off toward the interior of Yagi House without a wry comment.

Kazuki was still confused, as Saitou gently pressed her to lie back against the ground, his left hand still applying constant pressure to her neck.

"Saitou-san," she protested, "Saitou-san, I'm really fine. I promise you."

"Be still," Saitou insisted shortly, "Talking may make the bleeding worse. Souji will be here shortly with the bandages and we will dress this wound."

"Saitou-san," she tried again, "I'm really not hurt. You can let me up."

"_Yukimura_, _be _still_,_" Saitou barked, his voice uncharacteristically low and sharp, "The blood has already seeped through the cloth of my scarf. You are hurt. Lie still and be quiet."

At this outburst, she resolved to lie still. Although she was well aware that she was not hurt as direly as he feared, he had no way of knowing the secret engine of her perpetual health, and he was obviously deeply concerned.

Saitou apparently considered that if he kept talking while Okita fetched the dressings, then she would be more likely to remain silent, so he continued quietly, "I am sorry to have caused you such injury. I should not have drawn my sword upon you in the first place. I expected at least that you would draw your sword in return. I did not expect - I did not imagine that you would be able to sidestep my Iai three times. When you fell, I, I miscalculated. I did not intend to draw blood from you."

Okita returned with bandages just as Saitou fell silent, and the two of them crouched over her as Saitou drew his scarf away, ready to dress the wound quickly to apply pressure before any more of her blood was lost.

When Saitou drew his scarf away, they both sat in confused silence, staring at her bare neck.

There was no mark on her, simply the stain of the blood smeared here and there by the pressure Saitou had applied with the cloth of his scarf.

Saitou stared down at the scarf in his hands, where a palm sized blot of wet blood stood where he had pressed the cloth against her. Just to be sure, he used the end of his scarf to carefully clean her neck of the remaining blood, in case a small cut had been missed.

There was none.

As the two men sat on their heels, uncertain of what to do, Kazuki at last sat up under her own power.

"I told you," she began as sunnily as possible, with hope to cover the whole incident without having to suffer through any intense questioning, "I wasn't hurt, although I do appreciate that you were both worried. I'm sorry for having caused any trouble," she bowed her head very briefly.

"Saitou definitely cut you," Okita interrupted her abruptly, his green eyes heavy and thoughtful. "I saw him do it. It wasn't necessarily a deep cut, but I know that he cut you."

"But I'm not hurt," she protested, raising one slender hand to her throat. "See for yourself. There isn't any cut."

Saitou lifted his scarf so that the blood stain hung in the air between them. "This is your blood, Yukimura. It isn't mine. It isn't

Souji's." He was silent for a moment of serious thought, then he at last haltingly confessed, "I don't understand what's happened."

"Perhaps it's not meant to be understood," she suggested gently, and he frowned as he got to his feet, then leaned down to offer his hand to help her to hers.

Okita stood as well, thoughtfully staring at the scarf that Saitou absently wound around his neck again, the bloody end trailing over his shoulder.

"I suppose that you still aren't going to recommend that I be allowed out of the compound then," Kazuki began weakly, because her trial had not turned out as successfully as she had hoped, and had ended up being trouble for both of the captains.

Saitou frowned at her briefly, and then looked away.

"I will give you a positive recommendation. So long as a captain of the Shinsengumi is nearby, you ought to be safe on the streets of the city. You are very perceptive and you have been trained well. It was my mistake," he said, "Not yours."

And then excusing himself, he turned away and moved off silently in the direction of the practice hall.

Okita shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, and throwing his hands up once, wandered off toward his own rooms.

Kazuki was left behind to retrieve her forgotten broom and thoughtfully sweep the porch under the early afternoon sun.

5. 1864: The First Year: Early July

****1864****

****The ****First ****Year****

_Early __July_

Summer finds Kazuki having adjusted well enough to the life she leads among the captains of the Shinsengumi. She has spent the months since her arrival in Kyoto cloistered away from the city, although she still longs to search for her father. She has not let herself remain idle in Yagi House, however. She cleans the compound, cooks regularly, does laundry and mending, and runs errands for the captains, as well as tending to her garden. The busy nature of her life keeps her from dwelling on the long months it has been since she has had any word from her father.

Hijikata and Sannan have long been returned from Osaka, although the colonel suffered a terrible wound in battle there that leaves him unable to wield a sword.

6. Remember How I Kept You Waiting: Ikedaya

_Zansetsu**__**:** ****__**The **__**Lingering **__**Snow**_**

Hakuoki: Shinsengumi Kitan

Saitou Hajime x Yukimura, Okita Souji Friendship/Devotion
Route

****The ****Ikedaya ****Affair****

Remember ****How **_**I **_**Kept **_**You
Waiting****

_Early _July_, 1864_

**_The_ 4_th _day _of _the_ 6_th _month_, _Minatsuki_,
Genji 1, _Hour _of _the _Horse_**

_Shinsengumi _Headquarters_, _Yagi _House_, _Mibu_

The summer heat was oppressive. It was her first time experiencing the stifling heat of a Kyoto summer; Kondou reassured her that the heat was to be expected, and she had best not hope for it to break until late September. Like her, the senior command of the Shinsengumi had come primarily from Edo, where the summers were rainy, and the heat not so intense.

It still rained in Kyoto, and when it did, there was some respite from the terrible heat, so much that one wanted to rush out into the storm and revel in the momentary bliss of precipitation. But when it did not rain, the heat was hellish.

The high temperatures had left many of the soldiers of the Shinsengumi ill with heatstroke or stomach ailments, and they spent the hot days stretched out on the floor of Maekawa House in abject misery, suffering from diverse afflictions. There were barely forty able men that the Shinsengumi could muster on any given day, but if this worried the leadership, they did not show it. The captains remained generally in good humor despite the punishing heat, and did not seem to suffer from the varied ailments of their soldiers.

Kazuki prescribed a number of simple herbal remedies for the men in the barracks who were suffering, and while her treatments did seem to provide some meager relief, the terrible heat seemed to press the sick men against the earth, weakening their constitutions and their willpower. In a war waged against the resplendent and unmerciful sun, Kazuki found herself defeated.

And there was no escaping the sun. Inside the rooms of Yagi House the air was dizzyingly close, even with all the doors thrown open to admit the paltry, elusive breeze. Outside the sun was brilliant and blinding, as if it had the intention of cooking her where she stood against the dusty earth. The only respite came from sheltering in the shade of one of the courtyard's wispy trees and hoping for the blessing of a feeble breeze, or the miracle of a brief downpour.

Kazuki divided her idle time between attempting to hide from the terrible heat indoors and attempting to hide from the terrible heat out of doors. In the courtyard there was at least her garden to occupy her attentions, and she faithfully and patiently watered it

through all the punishing days of the summer.

It had already produced the first crop of young vegetables, herbs for her amateur apothecary, and any number of flowers, some of which she dried in bunches hanging upside down from the crossbeams in her room.

It was to her garden that she went that day, seeking something to help her pass the time through the terrible midday heat. She went with a bucket and a ladle to water her garden, and found Sannan Keisuke sitting alone on a stone bench.

His head was bent so that his hair fell into his face, and he seemed to be studying some indeterminate point on the ground, the blazing sun gilding the lenses of his glasses with fire so that she could not see his eyes.

She was not sure that he had realized she was there, so intent was he on the dusty earth, when he looked up at her suddenly, his eyes narrowed.

"Yukimura-kun," he began, his voice calm and cool despite the blistering heat, "What has possessed you to think that you are at liberty to wander around the compound as you please?" Where before he had been kind, now his words held a subtle poison, like water from a tainted well.

She balked at that, because she had been wandering around as she pleased for nearly six months already. She often had chaperones and babysitters, but so long as she kept to common, well-traveled areas in the compound, she was rarely chastised. In fact, when she had asked Kondou about it, he had told her that Yagi House was her home while she lived with them, as it was theirs, and that she was just as welcome in any of the public areas as any other member of the Shinsengumi. This had been an uplifting talk, and she had gone back to her room feeling as if she had begun to belong to Yagi House and the Shinsengumi.

But the truth was, she had never received explicit permission from Hijikata lifting the order of solitary confinement. When she had first come to Yagi House he had told her that she was expected to stay in her room, and out of trouble. Of course she hadn't, and as time had gone on the captains of the Shinsengumi had simply accepted that she appeared to be mostly harmless and let her do what she liked, within reason.

Kondou had given her permission to keep a garden, but Hijikata had not, and perhaps more importantly at this particular moment, Sannan had not. Although Kondou was the supreme commander of the Shinsengumi, he did not always appear to have the final word on things, particularly when both Hijikata and Sannan disagreed with him.

"Ah," she panicked a little, unwilling to further provoke Sannan's ire, "I've just come to water my garden, Sannan-san. I'm sorry if I've disturbed you."

"I am disturbed because you are moving about the compound without an escort," Sannan answered sharply, then he seemed to regain control of his composure and continued at a measured pace, "If no one has been

tasked with watching you today, you should have the sense and the manners to remain in your room without being told."

"I'm sorry, Sannan-san," Kazuki squeaked an apology, bowing so quickly that some of the water from her bucket slopped out onto her feet. Sannan frowned at her.

"I don't require your excuses or apologies, Yukimura-kun," Sannan continued evenly, "I require your obedience. You may not be a soldier of the Shinsengumi, but you certainly are a responsibility of the Shinsengumi." The way he said the word made it clear that what he really meant was 'liability.' Her hands tightened around the handle of the bucket.

"I'll go back to my room then, Sannan-san," she said hurriedly and apologetically, and turned to rush away, desperate not to burst into tears in front of him at the feeling of her own smallness.

"Yukimura-kun," he called after her coolly, stopping her in her tracks, "Do you intend to take that bucket of water back to your room with you?"

"Ah," she panicked again, hastily putting the bucket down on the ground, "No sir, sorry sir. I'm sorry, I just wasn't thinking."

"I'm sure you weren't," Sannan said crisply, and then turned his face away from her. "Take the bucket back to where you got it from, and then return to your room. Is that clear enough, Yukimura-kun?"

"Yes, sir," she hurried to acknowledge his order, picking the bucket up again. "I'm sorry, sir," she repeated again, a little desperate to receive some sign of absolution from the Colonel. Kazuki was very susceptible to threats and guilt levied upon her by authority figures, and was deeply worried that she had caused Sannan some unnecessary personal stress.

He __shouldn__'__t __have __to __waste __time __worrying __about __my __bad __behavior__,_ she thought to herself, feeling low. _He __has __enough __troubles __to __worry __about__._

Sannan had been distant and a little strange since his return from Osaka. His left arm hung limply at his side, injured beyond his body's means to repair it, but worse even than the physical damage was the damage that had been done to his psyche. His heart had been maimed, and she could sense his hurt and his frustration even if she had no means to offer him any sort of comfort that might have mattered to him.

_If __father __had __been __here_, she thought, staring long at Sannan's injured arm, _Things __might __have __been __different__._
_Medicine__, __western __medicine __might __have __been __able __to __do __what __traditional __medicine __could __not__._

He turned again and caught her eyes on him, and he frowned very slightly. He was angry.

"Is my lame body so interesting to you?" he asked her shortly, and he was already coiling to strike again like a viper, angry and half-mad with frustration behind that calm, brittle exterior.

"No," she began, then stumbled, shaking her head, "No, it's just that I'm worried, Sannan-san. Please be careful of your health. It isn't good to sit out in the sun for too long in this heat."

His eyes widened slightly, apparently startled by her shy advice, and she took this momentary respite to bow again and excuse herself, rushing to return the bucket and the ladle from whence they came.

After she had gone, Sannan Keisuke found it impossible to resume his moody contemplation of the dry ground and stood, wrapping his good hand around his useless arm, as if to shelter it from the eyes of others, and sought the solace of his private room.

* * *

><p>Early _July__, 1864_

The 5__th __day __of __the_ 6__th __month__, __Minatsuki__,
__Genji__ 1, __Hour __of __the __Snake__

_In __the __vicinity __of __Hourikawa__-__douri__, __central
__Kyoto__

Half a year indoors had made a bumpkin of her, and as she walked at Okita's side, a few steps behind him, her eyes darted from place to place, as if she was worried she might miss a bare instant of this rare trip out into the city. He apparently found her effervescent enthusiasm amusing because he chose to comment on it as he paused to idly scratch the back of his neck.

"You know we're not out on a sightseeing tour, right Kazuki-chan?" he asked, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

It was true, they were not on a sightseeing tour. She was accompanying the first troop on its routine daytime patrol of the city, and Okita was ostensibly her guardian and her babysitter. He had already warned her that he would leave her to be cut to ribbons if she got herself into trouble, and although Hijikata had demanded that Okita take proper responsibility for her safety, the first troop captain's acquiescence had been vague at best, and she had no desire to test the generosity of his spirit.

But despite this friendly threat, she could do nothing to control her buoyant spirits. The city was overwhelming in its color and vigor and activity, and beyond that she was finally out in the heart of it, actively searching for information concerning her missing father. Hijikata had seemed a little reluctant to let her go, but when he had at last offered her the opportunity to search for father in the company of the daily patrols, she had leapt at the opportunity.

She would not find her father hiding in Yagi House, no matter how hard she looked for him. She had to go out into the city, and Hijikata ultimately understood that. She had promised to be attentive and obedient, and so the Vice Commander had turned her loose with Okita as her chaperone.

The color rose in her cheeks and she nodded, "I'm sorry, Okita-san. I don't mean to be a bother. There's just so much to look at."

Okita responded with a noncommittal shrug, "Look at whatever you like, just be aware that walking next to me makes you a target. You might not be wearing the haori, but you're with us, and that means to them, to all those people you keep idiotically staring at, you're one of us. Due to some, ah," he paused and laughed at something he found privately funny, "Circumstances beyond our control, we're not exactly popular in the city. Just standing close to me is enough to earn you a blade in your back from some people," he advised pleasantly.

If he expected her to quail at this affectionately offered warning, he was disappointed.

She offered her own hands to him, palms up, a sign that this was a truth she could do nothing about.

"The Shinsengumi has agreed to help me. I'd be a poor friend if I was afraid to be seen with you. I won't hide. I'm not ashamed."

At this Okita laughed unexpectedly, as if he found her to be an endlessly entertaining treat.

"You're something, you know that Kazuki-chan?" he confessed, slapping her on the shoulder. "You're obscenely impractical, and I think you might just be a little slow. A clever girl would be concerned with her own skin."

"I don't want to be clever if it means I have to be untrue to my feelings," she declared with definite resolve, and Okita dissolved into laughter again.

* * *

><p>As a direct result of her presence during the patrol, the first troop raided a small shop that turned out to be a heavy arms cache belonging to the Choshu. Okita managed to take a prisoner during the scuffle, and after long hours of interrogation, the man had revealed a Choshu plan to kidnap the emperor and to put the city to the torch.<p>

With this information revealed, the Headquarters of the Shinsengumi exploded into activity as the men prepared for a nighttime raid. Kazuki was swept along by this bedlam of movement and noise, and with no conscious decision on her part, found herself taken as a page and a messenger by Kondou Isami, and left the compound of the Shinsengumi for the second time that day.

* * *

><p>Early _July__, 1864_

The 5__th __day __of __the__ 6__th __month__, __Minatsuki__,
__Genji__ 1, __Hour __of __the __Boar__

_In __the __vicinity __of __Ikedaya__, __central __Kyoto__

The men of the Shinsengumi lay in wait outside the Ikeda Inn for hours, waiting for reinforcements from the Aizu and the Judiciary, but as the night wore on and the moon sailed high and remote among the stars, it became obvious that no help would come.

It was unclear exactly how many Choshu ronin were inside the inn, but Okita seemed confident that they outnumbered the ten men who crouched in the shadows, wearing the jagged blue of the Shinsengumi. Some discussion was made of sending for the men who waited outside Shikoku, and at last one of the Inspectors was dispatched, but Okita remained restless.

The night was slipping past them, and with it the Shinsengumi's chance of apprehending the subversives who were meeting inside the inn. At last the men could stand it no more, and with a wild yell Koudou led them on a charge into the inn, ready to kick in doors and make arrests with lethal force, if necessary.

Kazuki they left crouched in the shadows, warning her away from coming into the light of the street, where she might be attacked by fleeing ronin.

With the inspector, Yamazaki, gone, she was left alone in the heavy heat of the night, listening to screams of fear and of battle as the night swept on around her.

* * *

><p>She crouched in the shadows, alone, for some time, wondering why it was that she had come to this place, and what it was that she had meant to do. They had all gone in fearlessly and recklessly, shouting their challenges to the sky, ready to battle whoever stood before them, to fight their own deaths to a bloody standstill, to carry their standard to victory no matter the cost.<p>

She was only one girl, not yet sixteen. She had never drawn her sword with intent to kill, and was not sure she could do such a thing.

What right do I even have to be here? she wondered to herself.

She looked down at her hands, small and pale in the moonlight.

They live their lives deliberately, and I just let myself be swept from place to place, she closed her eyes. Everyone seems to have a picture of the future they want to see, and they're fighting as hard as they can to reach it. What is it that I want? What kind of future do I want to see?

Ultimately, the answer was simple, not embroidered with arabesques and high-minded ideals, and she understood the sense of it even if she could not yet put it into words.

A high, strange shriek cut the stillness of the moment, a sound of pain and anguish.

She wanted to see a future that they greeted together. She wanted them to live.

She would do what she could.

* * *

><p>Inside the inn, it was chaos. Perhaps she had had some different image of a battle fought by men with such discipline and skill with the blade as the captains of the Shinsengumi. If she had expected to see a show of art and craft in a silent and disorienting exchange of mortal wounds, she was disappointed.<p>

The air in the inn was close and stifling, and filled with the shouts and cries of men who battled for their lives. She had to throw herself flat against the wall to avoid being skewered by a blade that had not even been intended for her. Shinpachi was in the kitchen, his feet dug into the hard-packed dirt floor, holding off three men on his own, with no apparent hope of assistance. As she sidled past the fight, she could hear Heisuke's whoop of triumph from somewhere past Shinpachi, and knew that the fight was being carried on out of doors as well as inside.

For the first time, Kazuki really understood the meaning of the blue haori that the men of the Shinsengumi wore. In the pitched and messy battle, the haori stood out as a warning and a challenge to their enemies, like the aggressive yellow stripes of a hornet. The haori also made it easy to differentiate allies from enemies at a glance, even in the maelstrom of noise, movement, and violence. They were a sign of provocation and of solidarity.

She found Kondou near the back stairs, fighting in a open room against several assailants. There was a man face down on the floor at his feet, and his katana was already red with the blood of his enemies. In the midst of a fight, Kondou was very different than he was when he sat with her companionably discussing sweets and flowers. He was proud and fierce and noble, and even with little experience herself she could still feel his fighting spirit across the room as it pushed back his enemies and made them quail and tremble. This was a man who led his men with deeds and not words, with his passionate spirit and his pursuit of the wild and impossible. He was a man who forced dreams into reality with the brute force of his will, and then nailed them to the ground so that they would not escape him.

As she hesitated against the cover of the stairwell, mesmerized by the spectacle of Kondo's manic battle, she drew the attention of one of the frantic, battle crazed ronin, and he was upon her even as she fumbled to draw her kodachi.

But Kondou had been aware of her presence there against the stairwell, even though she hadn't called to him or made any moves to draw his attention. Without breaking the flow of his movement, he turned and cut her attacker down, striking a mortal blow across his unguarded back. The ronin fell without a gurgle, and his blood quickly spread across the wooden floor, pooling under the soles of her zori.

"Souji is upstairs," Kondou called to her, turning back to the dizzy mess of the battle, "There isn't enough room for two men to fight up there, but you might be able to watch his back." He gave her a confident, paternal smile as he lunged to take advantage of an opening, "Don't be afraid. I know that Souji will take care of you."

That was the great, warm spirit of Kondou Isami: an unshakable belief

in the capability of his men and the confidence that they could conjure miracles and avert catastrophes with nothing more than their guts and insurmountable determination.

With his words of faith wrapped around her like a shroud, Kazuki had the courage to climb the stairs into the dark unknown of the second floor of the inn.

The upstairs was much worse than the downstairs had been: dim and confined and as sickeningly hot as if the building had been on fire. The sweat beaded on her forehead and slipped down her face as she climbed inexorably upward. At the head of the stairs she came out into a small room with a low ceiling and found herself at Okita's back as he held no less than five men in a standoff.

He spared her a brief glance over his shoulder, then turned his eyes back to the room in front of him, which was overfull of Choshu ronin and drawn blades, so the place appeared to be a forest of steel and sweaty, terrified flesh.

"Best keep out of my way, Kazuki-chan," he advised calmly, and if she had been able to see his face she would have seen that he was smiling peacefully, and that his eyes were dilated and out of focus, as if he were reading the intentions of an entire room filled with enemies at once.

Apparently the men in front of them knew who they faced, so none of them seemed particularly eager to cross swords with him. He held the hallway and the stairs, so they had no route of escape except through him. She had come upon him in a moment of heady anticipation, while he waited for the tension to overcome them so that their discipline broke, leaving them easy targets for his brilliant swordplay. It hung in the air like overripe fruit.

The moment came all at once like a gunshot. The man closest to Okita's left panicked and tried to scramble off down the hall. When Okita moved, it was beautiful, and it was blindingly fast, although she had an easier time following the movements of his sword than she had had following Saitou's. It wasn't as if Okita displayed less skill, if anything he had greater grace. It was more as if time slowed down around him, as if he bent the rules of the universe to his own will, and she could follow the movement of his sword because it was like music, clear, ordered, and perfect.

He was the Shinsengumi's sword saint, Okita Souji.

The man who had broken formation and tried to flee was dead at Okita's feet before he had time to cry out, his eye pierced and his heart skewered even as Okita casually flicked the blood from his sword.

The room exploded into pandemonium at this, and Okita prepared to dance forward into the fray, leaving Kazuki pressed against the wall behind him. His advance was halted by a surly voice which split the room like low thunder.

"Out the window, you imbeciles," it growled, and Kazuki was alarmed to see one of the men at the back of the room bodily pick up one of his comrades and toss him out the open window. The thrown man went yelling blue murder into the courtyard below, where other members of

the Shinsengumi waited. There was a sudden storm of shouts and steel following his defenestration, but apparently the ronin on the second floor preferred the chance of a gruesome death after a leap from the second story to the certainty of one delivered by the able blade of Okita Souji, because they all rushed toward the back of the room.

What followed was a confused scramble of drawn blades and terrified men as some leaped out the window of their own accord, and others were shoved as the panicked men pressed forward, seeking any means of escape. Okita was powerless to stop this mad retreat because even as he moved to cut them off, the man who had thrown his ally out the window stepped into his line of movement, forcing him to hold and take a stance.

Within an unbelievably brief span of seconds, Okita and his tall, dangerous adversary were alone in the close upstairs, with only Kazuki as a witness.

A second standoff had begun.

The man who had remained to cover the retreat of the fleeing Choshu warriors was tall and lean, with hair the color of straw, and a smile as menacing as Okita's own. He wore only one blade at his waist, and this he had drawn casually as he advanced.

With a start, Kazuki realized that his man alone had stood before Okita Souji and had not been concerned enough to even draw his sword.

"I've heard that the peasant filth of the Shinsengumi have some meager amount of skill," the blonde man announced with a vague sort of interest, "I hope that the farmers' sons who like to make-believe they're samurai can provide me with at least a little entertainment, otherwise this evening will have been a worthless waste of time." As he spoke, the tall man had made a laconic signal with his hand, a brief movement of his fingers that dared Okita to challenge him.

At this provocation, Okita lunged forward, ready to take advantage of the carelessness of the other man's relaxed guard, snarling "Why should I give a shit what a spoon-fed rich boy thinks?"

But instead of finding an easy opening, Okita was driven back by the wide, powerful arcs of the blonde man's sword, which he wielded with surprising speed and disturbing brutality. The sound of the steel striking as their blades crossed was like the anger of the gods, and sparks were thrown off from the fury of the exchange. They fell like glowing cinders from a house fire, flickering into oblivion as they went.

The sweat slipped down the side of Okita's face and gathered under his chin. The heat was like poison, and it was difficult to breathe. Almost against his will, he began to pant.

The swordsman in front of him seemed unperturbed by the heat or the exertion, as if he commonly passed his time in the temperatures of hell. He still stood lackadaisically, as if he had no need to take a stance, or even to give Okita the whole of his attention. He was not even breathing hard, as if wielding his heavy katana with stormy force great enough to drive Okita back was nothing more taxing than

fanning himself on a palace veranda.

If Okita's heart faltered at this show of dominance, he gave no indication of it. The whole of his self was focused on the man in front of him and his drawn blade. He approached with a feint; he shifted directions suddenly; he struck high and he struck low with the speed of a god; he took advantage of blind spots and weak areas of defense, and yet every time he was driven back with ringing blows that shook the room and threw off sparks.

He had not yet landed one blow, no matter the trajectory of his attack, and as Kazuki watched Okita lunge repeatedly, only to be thrown off casually time after time by his unmoving adversary, she realized what Okita himself had realized: that although the blonde man had not taken a stance, had appeared to show them a lackluster defense riddled with openings, in truth there were none. Okita could not touch him.

It was then that Kazuki realized that Okita was not fighting a man, but some kind of terrible beast, like a fairy tale monster.

"I expected better than this tripe," the monster glowered. He sounded annoyed, but ultimately unsurprised. "But I should know better than to expect anything from peasant filth. Know your place, you drudge. You should go back to wallowing in the dirt where you belong."

Okita surged forward again, his blade desperately seeking an opening. The beast man gave him none, and he was again repelled.

He was breathing hard now, the sweat making his kosode stick to the small of his back. Kazuki wished desperately that she could give him what he needed: an opening to strike his calm, brutal enemy, but she knew that if she drew her own sword she'd do nothing but get in his way and possibly get herself killed.

If the sword saint could not touch him, then what hope did she have?

Her eyes swept the room for any means of creating even a brief distraction. At her feet were a number of cushions and an overturned shogi board. She did not have confidence in her ability accurately hurl a shogi board at Okita's enemy, but near the board, tipped on its side from the scuffle, was a bowl. It was the right size to throw, she thought, small enough that she might be able to hit the target she aimed at. She dropped to her hands and knees to seize it, shoving the spilled pieces back into the cup as she did, and then she stood again, waiting for the right moment to throw it.

The moment came in the brief space of time right after their blades had rung off one another, as Okita was pushed back. Kazuki threw the bowl with all her might at the blonde man and hoped that she might be able to give Okita what he so desperately needed.

The blonde man was surprised by the unexpected missile, and he moved instinctively to block it with his sword. His blade shattered the bowl, and the shogi pieces exploded into the air around him like a cloud of flies.

Okita didn't waste the opening, spared no time to offer his thanks, but his eyes flicked to her briefly and she read pride and

satisfaction there before he turned his full attention to his enemy again, his blade a streak of fury and art.

But his true strike, delivered with beauty and with power, did not land. Even in his confusion, the beastly man with the sun colored hair managed to catch Okita's blade on his own, and the beast-man's riposte was devastating, as if he had forgotten to curb his strength in the confusion of the moment. The sound of the strike split the heavens, and Okita staggered back from it, losing the form of his stance as he did.

Seeing his opponent's weakness, the blonde man at last moved from where he stood, closing on Okita with murder as his only clear intention. Then, as if he had no need of dirtying his blade on Okita's carcass, he delivered a kick square in the center of Okita's chest with such force that it might have caused his lungs to collapse, and the first troop captain went flying into the wall behind him, hitting with such force that the plaster dimpled, creating a spiderweb of cracks that radiated from his point of impact.

Okita reflexively covered his face with his hands, and then his body shook as he coughed uncontrollably, and she saw the blood fly like mist through his fingers, staining his hands and his chest.

"Oh?" the tawny beast-man murmured with vague surprise, "So there is blood in your veins. I had expected water."

He moved to advance on Okita, who was still limp after his earth-shaking impact into the wall, hunched over, trembling, not from fear, but from the force of the blow.

It was in that moment that something small flared up inside Kazuki, like a match being struck. Her heart was illuminated.

Sometimes when there were no positive choices, your only option was to create one, even if you had to make it out of nothing.

She moved.

"Stand down," Kazuki ordered passionately, as she came to a sliding stop between the tawny-haired monster and the first troop captain, who was still doubled over against the wall where he'd been thrown. Both the men seemed surprised by her sudden interposition. Okita's eyes were wide and startled before they were forced shut again by his coughing, and the beast-man's eyebrows rose slowly as he faced her, the long blade of his katana gleaming in the moonlight from the window. Perhaps the most surprised of all was Kazuki herself. She had not had any delusions of heroic grandeur when she had thrown herself into the midst of their fight; she had only felt that she must do something.

And so now she found herself standing between them, one of her arms thrown out imperiously, as if she were quite used to giving orders to armed adversaries. Standing between them, unarmed before a hostile party, and in front of a wounded man, she knew she could not afford to show her fear.

I must be calm, she repeated to herself as she stared down the tall, blonde monster, whose eyes were the violent, brilliant red

of maple leaves. _I _must _be _calm _and _in _control _of
myself._

As he recovered from the momentary shock of her declaration, the ruby-eyed man's lazy amusement turned to aggravation, and his mouth turned down at the corner.

"Who are _you _to give me orders?" he growled the question angrily, his voice low and brutal. It rumbled, like the threat of a far off storm. He took a step forward, and as he did she felt his immense presence sweep past her, over her, as if he would throw her down with the sheer force of his will: angry, elder, and sovereign.

The pressure from his presence was heavy and terrifying, and she was only one girl, not yet sixteen, with a trembling heart and a gentle soul. But Okita was on the ground behind her suffering from a wound that was serious enough to make him spit up blood. At best he had broken ribs, at worst he was suffering from internal bleeding and ruptured organs.

"This man is injured beyond his capacity to fight," she said what her heart felt, and her voice was strangely cool and regal. "He is no longer a threat to you. Leave him be."

The beast-man regarded her with narrowed eyes, but she did not move from the spot where she stood. His gaze swept the length of her small frame, as if he had had difficulty comprehending the meaning of her defiance, and then something gave him pause as his eyes came to rest heavily on her and the corner of his mouth turned up in an indolent, superior smile. It was the smile of a king and a conqueror. It was the self-satisfied smile of a man who fears nothing at all under heaven.

She could not say what it was that he had seen that had turned his annoyance into triumph, but she tried not to let his change in expression unnerve her, even as he took another step forward.

He seemed to be debating exactly what to do with her, the blade of his katana still naked and menacing, although he kept its tip pointed at the floor as he advanced on her. His presence was intoxicating - hypnotic and arresting - like an invocation of black magic. She forgot the fury of the battle that raged inside the inn, forgot the passions that had pushed her to leap madly into the midst of drawn blades, and she even forgot the man who lay behind her wounded, until at last he spoke with some difficulty, panting for breath.

"When a man is fighting for his life with a girl behind him, he never wants to hear her beg for mercy on his account. You've hurt my feelings, Kazuki-chan," he admitted ruefully, wiping the blood away from his mouth as he struggled to stand. "You're always supposed to believe that I'll win."

He managed to get to his feet and staggered forward until he stood at her shoulder, and then he flashed her a ragged, arrogant grin and murmured, "Trust me," into her ear before putting himself between her and the advancing beast-king. He swept the hilt of his katana low, kept the tip of the blade pointed up toward the narrow ceiling, and let his left foot slide forward slightly, and there he stood, breathing heavily, his own blood still smeared across his mouth and his chest.

Then, Okita Souji smiled.

It was a smile whose soul was a threat, a challenge, a declaration of tattered, indomitable will. It was the smile of a lunatic whose only pleasure comes from violence.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he offered pleasantly, the tip of his katana wavering slightly as he struggled to hold it steady and maintain his stance. "But I'm not going to let you run. You're an enemy, and that means I've got to kill you."

The blonde stranger had ceased advancing when Okita had struggled to his feet and had remained stationary, observing the situation as it developed. When he heard Okita's cordial threat, his upper lip curled.

"You can barely stand, you ignorant piece of garbage. You're covered in your own blood and filth, and you're going to threaten me?" he shrugged laconically as if he had tired of the evening's amusements, and to Kazuki's surprise, he sheathed his sword. "There isn't any pleasure in killing the weak and pitiful," he said indifferently, looking at Okita as if he might have been an unseemly stain on the floor: unpleasant, but ultimately uninteresting. His crimson eyes flicked to Kazuki again briefly, and the slow smile returned to his face.

He said nothing, simply took two steps backward, without taking his eyes off of her, and then leapt out the open window, into the courtyard below.

"Don't you run, you goddamned coward," Okita howled after him even as he fled, sinking to one knee, the force of his overwhelming willpower nearly spent. "I can still fight," he insisted, breathing raggedly, his face wet with sweat and his eyes gumming with tears as he coughed. "I can still fight," he panted, and as she scrambled around in front of him to brace up his shoulders with her palms, his katana clattered to the floor as he seized the front of her kosode, leaving a smear of blood along the collar as he gripped it with white knuckles. "I can still fight," he sobbed, coughing and pleading, as if by repeating this simple statement he could force it to be true. His face was a sickly white now, the hair wet against his forehead. She cried out his name as his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped forward onto her.

After a terrified struggle, she managed to roll him off of her, onto his back, and she cried out in relief when she found his pulse and verified that he was still alive, only unconscious. Although her fears had been momentarily eased, she wasted no time pushing his kosode open and letting her sensitive fingers trace the battered lines of his ribs. Miraculously, none of them seemed to be broken, despite the beating he had taken, although she suspected, based on the darkening marks along the right side of his body, that he was very bruised.

She still had no idea why he was spitting up blood. That meant a wound some place that she couldn't see. She gripped her hands so tightly that her nails bit into her palms, then she leaned forward to brush the hair away from Okita's sweaty face. The second floor of the inn was oppressively hot.

"It's Souji?" came a quiet voice at the head of the stairs, and Kazuki looked up to find Saitou there, his sword drawn.

He was very tense, his eyes sweeping room and the open hallway for threats. It was then that Kazuki realized that with Okita in a dead faint, she had been left alone in the upstairs of the inn, with whatever Choshu ronin still lurked there.

"He's just unconscious," she responded quickly, keeping her voice low, lest she be overheard by someone with less-than-friendly intentions. "But he may be hurt badly. I can't tell. He was coughing up blood, but I can't find any sign of a wound."

Saitou nodded once in response, and then made a brief sign with his hand, indicating the open hallway to her right, a silent question regarding possible occupants.

She was forced to shake her head, and then made a small sign of her palms up, an admission that she had no idea who else might be in the upstairs with her, besides the dead man near the window. Except for the light coming from the open window, the second floor was very dark.

Saitou nodded once again, and then made another slight movement with his hand, a gentle push, palm towards her, indicating that she should remain where she was, at Okita's side. She nodded back, and before she had even finished this simple movement, he was gone down the hall, a blur of silent, terrible intention.

Her heart trembled as she counted out the long seconds to herself: one, two, three, four, five -

Saitou reappeared in the open hallway at seventeen, his sword sheathed and his back carefully kept toward the wall.

"There is currently no one else upstairs, but you cannot remain here," he said shortly, his deep blue eyes fixed on Okita's pallid form, "This location is too dangerous because there are two points of entry, the front stairs and the rear stairs. The possibility of threat is high. He must be moved."

She stood and turned to look at the room that had been at her back.

"If we have to move him, we ought to move him on a stretcher, since we don't know how badly he's been hurt." She moved to push some pillows off of a mat, so it was clear of debris and experimentally slid her fingers under it. "We ought to be able to carrying him downstairs on a tatami."

Saitou immediately moved to help her, pushing his own fingers under the opposite end of the mat and helping her lay it next to Okita.

"You lift his head, and I'll lift his knees," Kazuki directed, calm and focused now that she had a clear goal to concentrate on. She knew how to move an injured person. "Bring his arms up and grab his body from behind, around his chest." She mimed the motions for him, crossing her arms over her own upper body. "If you lift him that way,

you have the least chance of hurting him. We'll lift him at the same time. I'll say when," she moved to Okita's feet, and busied herself pushing his ankles apart.

"Yukimura," Saitou interrupted her ministrations, and she looked up to find he was watching the stairs behind them intently. He turned back to her, "I appreciate your desire to help Souji, but I think I had better call someone to help me carry him down."

"Everyone else is busy, aren't they?" she asked him, full of determination, "That's why you came upstairs alone, isn't it?" She gave him a reassuring smile, one that was warm and confident. "Don't worry about me, Saitou-san. I'm stronger than I look."

He looked at her then, in her bloodstained clothes, sitting with a dead man at her back and an injured comrade in front of her, and smiling warmly at him, as if he was the one who needed comforting in such a scene, and he made up his mind.

"Very well," he said simply. "We'll carry him together. Give me the signal when we should lift him."

In one smooth movement they lifted Okita onto the mat. They had no way to secure him, so she said, "We've got to be careful to keep him level, so he doesn't roll off."

Saitou had moved to the head of the stairs. He looked down, looked back at her briefly, and then descended several steps to check the situation below. He returned immediately, and nodded.

"The situation is in hand down below. We should be able to evacuate Souji safely," he moved to the end of the tatami mat where Okita's head lay. He looked down the stretcher at her, and she smiled at him again, reassuringly. He looked over his shoulder, toward the stairs, and then let his eyes come to rest on her again. "I'll walk backwards," he said simply.

They lifted Okita together when she gave the word, and she navigated the two of them, calling out their movements quietly and calmly. Her hands were steady under the heavy load of Okita's inert body, and this Saitou found surprising. She was a small girl, and young. For her to be able to bear up steadily and without complaint under the combined weight of Okita's body and the tatami was startling.

She is stronger than she looks, he thought to himself.
She is considerably stronger than she looks.

They managed to carry Okita down the steep flight of stairs without incident, and Kazuki could not help but feel a wave of relief wash over her as she felt her feet on the firm, level ground again, and the breeze that was sweeping in through the open front entrance, which was not cool, but was at least vaguely refreshing.

Kondou was in the back room, his sword still drawn, but when he saw who it was they carried on the stretcher, he rushed to their side, sheathing his sword.

"We should put him on the ground if we're going to speak," she advised Saitou, and so they did.

"Souji's been hurt?" Kondou asked, his face grim.

"He collapsed," Kazuki answered simply, "He was thrown into a wall. I can't find any wounds on him, but he was spitting up blood."

This was the first description that Saitou had heard of the altercation upstairs. He stopped scanning the room around them for potential hazards and turned to look at her seriously, the line of his mouth thinned.

"To throw Souji into a wall, the enemy must have been very strong," he said quietly.

Kazuki thought back to the man with the maple-red eyes and the presence of a dragon and shuddered. Saitou watched her reaction closely, but said nothing.

At last his eyes moved from her, back to his commander, and he asked, "Kondou-san, what is the current situation?"

Kondou looked at the wide room at his back where two men lay dead, and then waved toward the front of the inn, and the side door which led off into the courtyard.

"I think we've basically secured this location. All the rebels have either been slain or arrested. A few managed to cut themselves open rather than be taken. Harada-kun has gone with his troop after those that fled," he said.

Saitou nodded briefly, a silent show that he had heard and understood, then he turned to Kazuki.

"I will see that Souji is taken back to headquarters, but there are other people who require your assistance here."

Kazuki turned on her heel to face Kondou and learned that Heisuke and Shinpachi had also been injured, and that two men who had been in the courtyard when the fleeing ronin had jumped from the second story window had also been hurt badly. After learning where they were, she excused herself from their company, and rushed to the courtyard, ready to provide what aid she could.

Saitou's eyes tracked her as she went, but it was Okita who spoke, startling him, and he looked down to see the injured man slowly open his eyes.

"She's a stupid girl," he said wearily, and then the corner of his mouth turned up wryly as he finished, "But she tries her best."

Saitou said nothing in response.

* * *

><p>Early _July__, 1864_

The 6__th __day __of __the_ 6__th __month__, __Minatsuki__,
__Genji_ 1, __Hour __of __the __Tiger_

_Shinsengumi __Headquarters__, __Yagi __House__, __Mibu_

Kazuki sat quietly on the edge of the porch, her feet dangling down over her little garden, which was now green and verdant with growing things, and thought very hard about the events of the day.

She had come back to the compound with the injured men: Okita, Heisuke, Ando, and Nitta, escorted by Shinpachi, whose left hand had been cut open during the fight. Most of the Shinsengumi members had remained on active duty, escorting their prisoners to jail, chasing down stragglers, and keeping alert in anticipation of immediate repercussions to the raid.

Upon their return to the compound, an actual doctor had been summoned to care for the wounded, and while she had assisted him for some time with his examinations, he had not given her any information concerning their conditions that she did not already have. None of Okita's ribs were broken, although he was bruised badly. The doctor could detect no other internal injuries, and ended up attributing Okita's sudden fainting fit to a case of anemia brought on by the extreme heat and close quarters of the upstairs. The blood he had coughed up the doctor also blamed on anemia, although Kazuki was not so certain.

She did not contradict the doctor because she was not a doctor herself, only a doctor's child. She had had very little in the way of what others would perceive of as formal training in medicine, although she had been assisting her father with his work since she was a small girl. She could bandage wounds, treat sprains and sores and spells of simple seasonal sickness, and knew what herbs to suggest for bouts of indigestion, but complex diagnosis and treatment, surgery - these were things that were beyond her ken.

And she could not say what it was about Okita which made her distrust the doctor's diagnosis. Although she could point to the blood stain on her collar as an unexplained symptom, this was not enough to call his judgement into doubt, and she knew it. It was her instincts that were telling her that there was something else not right about Okita, something small and lurking, hidden from sight. It was as if she smelled the sickness on him. She had no other way to describe it, although it was not a smell she would have been able to relate to anyone else. It was a strange, uncertain smell, one of weakness and futility.

It had never before struck her so strongly, the things that she did not know and yet wished to know, so that she might be of service to those who depended upon her. Always before she had tended to the sick and injured at the elbow of her father, and he had seemed capable of doing anything: sewing up an open stomach wound, setting a bone that had been broken in more than one place, accurately identifying someone's sickness simply by speaking with them. She was used to being confident and self-assured when she dealt with the injured, both on the surface and in her heart. Now she was still confident and self-assured on the surface, because she could not show her fear to the people she was tending, but her heart had become bewildered and uncertain.

She was not used to disagreeing with a doctor. She was not used to feeling that her own skills were woefully inadequate.

"If only father were here, he would be able to make everything

right," she found herself murmuring aloud, to the audience of her silent garden.

Her father would not have shaken his head at the gash across Ando's stomach, or the bloody wound that cut Nitta shoulder to hip across his back. Even if he had not been able to miraculously heal them, right as rain, he would have exhausted every tool in his repertoire before forsaking them as lost. Her father was calm and serious, and completely dedicated to his work with nigh-on single-minded obsession. He would not have abandoned hope.

But then perhaps things would not have been better at all. Furutaka Shuntaro, the man Okita and the first squad had arrested the previous day, had told the Shinsengumi that her father had been in the company of the Choshu: enemies of the Bakufu and enemies of the Shinsengumi.

If her father became an enemy of the Shinsengumi, what did that make her?

When he spoke it was unexpected. She had not heard his quiet footsteps, and turned to find him standing behind her, close enough to reach out and touch.

"It's very late," Saitou said simply.

She smiled then, wan and tired. "It's actually very early, although I'm sure you know that," she corrected, looking up at the sky, which had already begun to show the pale fingers of dawn. Kazuki had discovered that this was the only hour in which the city was cool, after the heat of the night had at last evaporated, but before the heat of the day had been born. "It's morning already."

She did not know when he had returned to headquarters, but the fact that he still wore his blue haori was a strong indication that he had just come in from the street.

"I didn't expect to find you here," he explained, looking down at her bare feet, which were nestled among the new heads of lettuce, wet with the morning dew.

"I couldn't sleep," Kazuki admittedly weakly, then shook her head. "Oh, I slept for a little while, earlier. But then I woke up," she confessed, and turned her eyes back to the low shapes of the green things in her garden. "I suppose I've been thinking about a lot of things."

"You're troubled," he said shortly, and it was not a question, but a statement.

She let out a small sigh, and answered honestly, "I was just thinking that I'm not very much use to the Shinsengumi. I wish I could be. I'd like to be of help. Everyone works so hard, and does their best, but I don't know if there's anything I can do that anyone actually needs. I can look after cuts and bruises, but anyone can do that. I can grow flowers, but that only takes patience. I can play the shamisen a little, but that's nothing special."

If she had turned to look at him then, she would have seen that Saitou frowned very slightly.

"You don't have to do anything," he said. "No one expects you to do anything. I thought you understood the arrangement."

"I know you don't expect me to help," Kazuki said, shaking her head as if he had misunderstood her meaning. "But I love everyone in the Shinsengumi," she continued, full of simple, genuine emotion. "Isn't it natural to want to help the people that you care about?"

Her sudden, frank declaration caught Saitou totally unaware, and he was glad of the relative dimness of the porch as he felt the color rise in his cheeks, an altogether unfamiliar sensation. It was some moments before he trusted himself to speak.

"If you wish to help," he said at last, choosing his words carefully and speaking slowly, "Then think of what it is that only you can do."

She leaned forward on her knees and studied the dew that wet the lace-like greenery of the carrots. "But that's just it," she said, feeling a little sorry for herself, "I'm not sure there is anything that only I can do."

"Be yourself," Saitou suggested quietly, and this caught her by such surprise that she turned around where she sat and looked up at him where he stood, a few paces behind her. He was standing in the shadows, so she could neither see his eyes nor read his expression.

She smiled at him then, nodding, the color having risen in her own cheeks. "Of course," she said, "Of course that's it. The answers are always very simple, aren't they? If everyone else is working hard, then I have to work hard too, work as hard as I can, at the things that I can do."

Saitou said nothing in response, and if she hadn't been watching the spot in the shadows where he stood, then she might have believed he had left after his last comment, he stood so silently, unmoving. She turned back to look at the dim courtyard.

"I'm worried that I hurt Okita-san," she confessed, as if Saitou had need of this information.

He said nothing at first, then asked, "When we lifted him to carry him downstairs?"

She shook her head, "Oh no, I don't mean that I hurt his body. I think I hurt his feelings. It's just something he said to me."

Saitou did not ask what Okita might have said to her, and they spent the next span of moments in silence. She was no longer facing him, so she thought that he might have finally left her to herself. He had to be exhausted from the day's events, tired and dirty and still wearing the jagged blue that the men of the Shinsengumi only wore out on the streets. She did not turn to see if he was still behind her. She was keeping him from his rest. He ought to leave her company and seek the overdue comfort of sleep.

She had just decided that he had gone and that she was alone,

when he spoke again, slow and measured.

"What did Souji say?" he asked.

She looked down at her feet before answering.

"That terrible man had just kicked him into the wall, and I could tell he was badly hurt. He couldn't stand," she said, keeping her voice low, as if she feared someone other than him might hear this private confession, "I got between them. I know it wasn't very smart," she said, shaking her head helplessly at her own recklessness, "But it was all I could think of to do. I asked the horrible man to spare him, because he wasn't in any shape to fight any more," and here she smiled despite the tears at the corners of her eyes from the difficult memory, "But Okita-san said that I should never do that, never beg for mercy on his account. He said that I was always supposed to believe that he would win." She shook her head, struggling with her feelings. "I was afraid he would die. I didn't want him to die. I didn't mean to hurt him. I don't think I really understand."

Saitou was silent for some time, as if thinking of how to respond to her.

"Every member of the Shinsengumi is prepared to die," he spoke thoughtfully. "That is the way of bushi. We are not afraid of our own deaths. When you draw a sword, you must be prepared to die by one. It is the same with me."

"To fight with all you have doesn't mean you have to seek after your own death," she disagreed, shaking her head. "I know your pride is important, but your life - "

"I have chosen to live the way that I live," Saitou said quietly. "That means I have accepted my own death as inevitable."

"Everyone's death is inevitable," Kazuki insisted, "But that doesn't mean that life is something that should just be thrown away."

"I am aware of the value of my life," Saitou said shortly, then paused before adding, "But I would sell my last drop of blood to protect something important. Some things are not worth living without. I am sure it is the same for Souji."

"He wanted me to believe in him," she came to her answer slowly, her eyes focused hard on the beaded dew.

"The will to fight sometimes comes from strange places," Saitou spoke very quietly. "The Shinsengumi does not fight for accolades, but all men appreciate words of trust and praise."

"I did hurt him badly, then," she said softly. "Because I didn't trust him. Because I didn't have faith in his way of living."

"If you believe you have hurt someone, the best thing you can do is correct your behavior, so you do not hurt them again in the future," Saitou said. "Apologies of words have little meaning."

It was a thoughtful statement, full of serious consideration. She turned to thank him for listening to her troubles, and for offering

such solicitous advice, but when she did, she realized he had gone, and she was left sitting alone, her legs dangling over the side of the porch as dawn crept into the courtyard.

7. The Magic Rat and the Barefoot Girl

_**Zansetsu**__**: **__**The **__**Lingering **__**Snow**__

Hakuoki: Shinsengumi Kitan

Saitou Hajime x Yukimura; Okita Souji Friendship/Devotion Route

By Gabihime at gmail dot com

_**The **__**Magic **__**Rat **__**and **__**the **__**Barefoot
__Girl**__

_Mid __July__, 1864_

_The__ 14__th __day __of __the__ 6__th __month__, __Minatsuki__,
__Genji__ 1, __Hour __of __the __Snake_

_Shinsengumi __Headquarters__, __Yagi __House__, __Mibu_

In the days after the incident at the Ikeda Inn, Yagi House was busy. Their success at Ikeda had brought the Shinsengumi acclaim and greater public visibility, as well as a commendation from the Aizu Domain. The monetary reward had not been minor either, and this, coupled with the lingering thrill of their victory, left the rank and file in high spirits.

The entire compound was flooded with the men's sense of confidence and renewed purpose. They had fought hard, but she knew first hand that the battle had been bloody as well as costly: Ando was pale and clammy with a fever, and the wound across Nitta's back had begun to turn a dry, perilous color.

Gangrene.

She was sure it was gangrene. She could _smell _it, although it was far less subtle than the pale odor that hung off Okita in a wispy haze. The doctor had no treatments to offer, and while she had seen her own father treat gangrene by introducing maggots to eat away the dead flesh, she knew that only certain kinds of maggots could be used, and she had no knowledge of which kinds they were or where she might find some. She was also uncertain if the dying man would appreciate her putting flesh-eating larvae in his wounds. Even with the best treatment, at this point she was not sure there was much she could do for either of them.

She was not one to give up hope, but realistically, she knew that she had no magic medicine to regrow dead flesh and that wishing, even wishing very hard, could not kill an infection.

Fortunately, the injuries to the captains were less severe, although still serious.

Shinpachi had suffered a deep gash in his left hand where part of his thumb had been nearly cut away, but prompt treatment meant that it

was healing well. She forced him to let her inspect it and cleaned the wound and changed the dressings regularly, which meant that it was mending well, despite the fact that Shimpachi continued to use it. Sano described the time that Kazuki sat with Shimpachi's hand in her lap, carefully examining it, as 'the only time a girl would ever volunteer to hold his hand.' When Shimpachi retorted by saying that his hands were always busy with a sword, which made girls shy, Sano laughed until she worried he might be sick, while Shimpachi demanded to know what Sano thought was so funny.

Heisuke's wound was such that it could have easily killed him, had the strike been a little harder or delivered to his temple, as opposed to his forehead. As it was his skin had been split right down to his skull, and although it had bled profusely the night of the raid, now the wound had closed up and was healing. The hair that fell into Heisuke's face largely concealed the bandage across his forehead, but the wound was aggravated every time he changed expression and the skin on his face shifted. For someone as expressive as Heisuke, that meant his wound was aggravated regularly, and the pain often gave him headaches, although he tried to hide his discomfort. She also examined this wound regularly, checking to make sure that he had not reopened it with a wide smile or a wild frown. It was a deep cut and it would take time to heal.

Heisuke always spent the time she stared intently into his face at the wound with his cheeks flushed and his eyes averted, and tried to make small talk, which generally ended up being incoherent. Shimpachi seemed to enjoy these sessions immensely, and mostly passed the time by commenting on Heisuke's nonsensical conversation and by describing the smaller man's endlessly entertaining facial expressions to Sano, who, having eyes, could see them easily enough himself.

The last man on her rounds was the one who, given the scene she had witnessed, really ought to have worst injuries. In a way, perhaps, he did have the worst injuries. Although he had no cuts and no open wounds, Okita's ribs had been bruised badly during the raid. Under his kosode, rosy and violet-blue blotches spread their angry fingers across his chest and around and across his back. She had not been able to find any broken ribs that night, and subsequent examinations by the doctor had confirmed that Okita had none that either of them could find. But whether his ribs were broken or bruised, they had taken a beating, and Okita suffered intense pain whenever he moved the muscles along his chest or back.

It would take several weeks of bed rest for his bruises to heal and his pain to abate, and for Okita, who was an active soul, this diagnosis was mind-numbing. But despite his desire to be back on his feet immediately, he had the sense to realize how badly he'd been hurt, and did not complain overly much when he was told he had to keep still as much as possible. He wanted to hasten his recovery, so he generally did as he was told, took his medicines as he was told, and rested as he was told, but for Okita, far worse than the pain was the creeping boredom.

She had recognized his boredom almost immediately. Even the day after the Ikeda raid, when he was so sore he could barely move without grimacing, he had lay on his side and watched the busy affairs of the house as shod and bare feet thudded past his open door. The tea she brought to him eventually cooled as he watched the world rush on without him.

Unlike Kondou or Hijikata, he had little interest in reading, and no one to write letters to, he had laughed a little bitterly, so the bed rest was maddening. Kondou he had suggested he might write to his sisters, but he had turned his face away, uninterested. The commander had also brought a couple of books for Okita to read, knowing he was generally confined to bed, and these Okita sometimes half-heartedly paged through, as if he felt an obligation to at least pretend to read them since Kondou had been kind enough to loan them.

The other captains came by to talk with Okita from time to time, but by and large, they were all very busy in the aftermath of the Ikeda raid and the great influx of new applicants who were now nearly riotous in their desire to join up with the Shinsengumi.

So Okita was largely left to his own devices and her company. Sometimes she read to him, which he seemed to enjoy more than reading to himself, although he often teased her about the way she read the climactic battle scenes, with her soft, pleasant voice and her careful speech.

"You've got to read the battles with more vigor, Kazuki-chan," Okita had chided, staring vaguely out the open door at something she couldn't see. "When Kondou-san used to read to me it always seemed like there was a big fire burning inside his chest."

And so after that she had tried her hardest to read the battle scenes with more passion, but the fact that Okita often laughed during these recitations left her uncertain as to whether this was really an improvement or not.

The truth was, although Kazuki tried her best to be entertaining and engaging so he would not dwell on the long recovery period that loomed before him, he was not always interested in playing koi-koi with her, listening to her read, or hearing her talk about her garden.

Okita's care required a greater sophistication. There was one possible treatment that she had seen her father apply with great success in a similar situation, and so with determination in her heart, she decided to go about arranging it.

* * *

><p>She found Saitou sitting quietly in his room, his knees folded under him, his sword, the Ikeda Kijinmaru Kunishige, laid in front of him on the ground, silent and still, sheathed in its scabbard. She had often seen him sitting this way, seiza, all alone in an empty room, as if his entire life was spent at careful attention.<p>

She had called her intention to enter his room and had been granted admittance before sliding the door open, so he was expecting her. He kept his hands folded quietly in his lap and only turned his head as she entered.

"Do you require something?" he asked her, his voice low and calm.

Kazuki flushed, because naturally, she had come to his room to enlist his aid. "Ah, I'm sorry Saitou-san," she apologized, "It seems like I

always come to you when I need something. I'm afraid that's very rude of me."

His expression didn't change. "I told you to ask for my help when you had need of it," he said quietly.

"I know you did," she agreed as she smiled, an attempt to cover her embarrassment. "I suppose I just wish I didn't ask you so often."

The line of his mouth thinned very slightly, and he said again what he had said before: quiet, flat, but slightly accusatory. "You don't want my help?"

Her hands were full, so this time she could not flutter them in distress, so she bounced on her toes in place instead. She should have known. She __should __have __known__.

"Of __course I want your help, otherwise I wouldn't have come," she insisted, bouncing up and down in mild frustration.

Saitou's smile was as slow and spare as it always was, a subtle turn of his mouth.

"Then there isn't a problem," he said simply, and then as if he considered this element of their conversation closed and finished, his eyes flicked down to her hands and the burden she carried. "Do you have some difficulty concerning cucumbers?" he asked, and one of his eyebrows rose slightly. He was so serious, she could not really tell whether he intended to make a joke or not.

"No," she answered immediately, then she shook her head as she corrected herself, "Yes. I mean, not really. Cucumbers are only sort of tangentially connected, and the cucumbers that are connected aren't even these. I've brought these to you."

At last she remembered to smile properly as a visitor bringing a gift ought to do, and she crossed to where he sat and knelt to offer the cucumbers to him. There were two of them, freshly picked, connected by a wet string. She had cooled them down by soaking them in water from the well, so they were deliciously chilly, despite the heat of the day.

Saitou stared at the cucumbers blankly, as if had never seen their like before, but as she continued to patiently hold them out toward him, at last he could do nothing else but take them. As the wet string binding them passed from her hand to his, she felt the brief, warm contact of his fingers.

"They're from my garden," Kazuki explained helpfully. "I know this is a small way to say thank you for all the help you gave me breaking the ground, but I thought and thought about what you might like, and I wasn't sure you'd like flowers, so I decided to wait until there were some good cucumbers, and that's just now. You ought to go ahead and eat them while they're cold. They taste best that way on a hot day."

He stared at the cucumbers in his lap for a moment, and then she was pleased to see him patiently untie the string that bound the two cucumbers together. Then, unexpectedly, he offered one back to

her.

It was her turn to stare at it blankly, and so they sat again, silently staring at one another over the cucumber.

"It's for you," he said patiently, although it seemed as if he found the explanation entirely unnecessary.

"But Saitou-san," Kazuki protested, fluttering her hands in the way she did when she was agitated. "I gave those cucumbers to you!"

"And now I'm giving one of them to you," he agreed, his words brief and to the point.

He still held the cucumber toward her, and when she hesitatingly started to take it from him, he moved forward, making sure that the cucumber ended up firmly in her hands.

"You ought to eat it now, when it's cold," he advised quietly. "Someone told me that they're best that way."

At this she laughed, and as he had directed her to she sat down next to him and took a bite from the end of her cucumber. Satisfied that she actually intended on eating hers, he took a bite from the end of his, and so they sat together, eating the cold cucumbers and simply enjoying themselves.

At length they both finished their cucumbers, and Saitou who was very methodical in the way he approached problems, asked her what it was that she needed his help with.

She nodded her head smartly, and then began, "Before I tell you, I want you to know that I've already gotten Kondou-san's permission."

If she expected this to impress Saitou, it didn't. "What about the Vice Commander?" he asked without missing a beat.

"I don't think he'll really care one way or another," Kazuki said, shrugging. "I haven't asked him because he's been very busy, what with the new recruits and then what happened at Akebono-tei, but I don't think he'll care. I just don't want to bother him, especially when he's making the face with the angry eyebrows." She finished the last part of this statement with her palms up in front of her, as if she were utterly helpless before Vice Commander Hijikata's ire, frustration, and rage.

Saitou frowned ever-so-slightly, and he thought about it.

"It has to do with Okita-san," Kazuki volunteered, and hoped this might improve her chances of receiving help.

She did not really want to have to present her case to Hijikata, because in the aftermath of Akebono-tei, she was worried he might deny her request just out of bad temper. He really would have no other reason to deny it, she thought. It wouldn't be hurting anything, after all, and it shouldn't cause anyone any bother.

At last, Saitou seemed to have reached a decision, because he said, "Tell me what it is you want to do, and I will decide if we should

see the Vice Commander about it."

She told him and he thought about it some more, and then finally decided that they could proceed without the Vice Commander's explicit permission.

Pleased, she made to rise, hoping to move her plan into immediate action, but Saitou held out his hand to stay her, palm outward, so his hand quite invaded her personal space, without touching her. He was still thinking about something.

She hoped he wasn't having second thoughts about making her see Hijikata for permission, but she sat again obediently, and waited for him to speak.

He was silent for some time before he spoke, as if he were getting his words in order.

"At Ikeda," he spoke slowly, "You saw the man that fought Souji?"

The question startled her. Since the night of the raid, she had been trying her best not to think of the man who had fought Okita in the stifling confines of the second floor. He had been tall and terrible, like a warlock, or a dragon, and had had the bearing of a king and the pity of a tyrant. Even thinking of him, she trembled.

Saitou said nothing, but watched her closely.

When she realized he was still waiting for an answer, she nodded and then spoke, keeping her voice low, as if she feared who might overhear her.

"I saw him," she confirmed, and then shook her head. "I saw the whole fight, and it wasn't even really a fight. I realize that I don't know much about real battles, but Okita--san couldn't touch him." This last part she whispered as she covered her mouth with her hands, as if the recollection was horrifying to her. "I thought his stance was full of holes, but it wasn't, it mustn't have been, because Okita-san couldn't find any. I don't even know if he really took a stance at all. He didn't even move, but he was like an ogre swinging an axe, and every blow was so powerful. It was unreal. It was unnatural. I saw it all and it didn't make any sense. There is no way that man could have been so strong. There is no way that man could have been so fast. I saw it, and I don't understand it." She shook her head and repeated herself, "I don't understand it." She lowered her voice again to a whisper as she stared hard at the floor, "Okita-san's sword was notched in the fight. That's how brutal the blows were."

Saitou looked down at his own sword, still sheathed before him. "I have seen it," he admitted quietly. His eyes flicked back to her and they stayed on her, heavy and brilliant, the blue of lapis. "Did he speak to you?" he asked. "Did he say anything that might indicate his allegiance or his motives?"

She had heard that the man who had injured Heisuke had claimed that he was not from Choshu before leaving the inn. In both cases, Shinsengumi captains had been injured during an overwhelming display of dominance, and in both cases, the triumphant party had retreated,

leaving behind the unpleasant suggestion that they had, by their grace, _allowed _their opponents to live.

"He spoke to me," she admitted, then bowed her head because she found Saitou's direct gaze to be unnerving. She thought back to the tawny beast-man with eyes the color of violence, and tried to remember carefully what he had said to her. "Well, I got in front of him, after he kicked Okita-san into the wall. I told you that already," she bit her lip, "Then he got angry, and he wanted to know who I thought I was to tell him what to do."

"He could have killed you," Saitou said flatly, and she could feel his eyes still on her heavily.

Kazuki laughed weakly in response, "I know that," she admitted. "Really, that's all I could think of at the time, that he was going to kill me. But I had started going forward, so I had to keep going forward. It's not that I wasn't afraid. I was really very afraid, you know, so afraid I could barely stand up when he started to come toward me. But I had to stand my ground. It was the most important thing to me in the world at that particular moment: to stand my ground in front of him. I'm not really sure why. I mean, I wanted to protect Okita-san, that's why I got between them in the first place. But once I was standing there, I lost the reasons _why_, and it just became something I had to do, like it was part of my nature. You don't ask a rock why it's a rock. It's just a rock. I thought, '_I __will __not __show __my __fear __to __you__,_' like he didn't deserve to see it. I don't think I've ever thought something like that before."

"What did he say then?" Saitou prompted quietly, and she looked up to see that although he still had his eyes on her, he appeared to be looking _past__her_, as if trying to see the scene she was reconstructing in his mind.

"He didn't say anything at first," she confessed, shrugging. "He didn't say anything at all. He just stared at me like he could run me through, and then he did something strange. He smiled, Saitou-san. I don't understand why he did it, but he smiled."

"What was he looking at when he smiled?" Saitou questioned seriously, his entire attention focused on her again.

"Me," she answered helplessly, because all egotism aside, that could be the only answer. The beast-man hadn't been looking at Okita, or out the window at the moon, or at the dead man at his feet. When he had smiled, he had done so while staring daggers at her.

"You're sure?" Saitou asked, and she nodded, troubled. He made no attempt to ease her worries, but simply prompted, "Continue."

"Well, after that, Okita-san got to his feet and told me what I told you before," she narrated obediently. "He got between me and the other man, and told him that he wouldn't let him leave alive. The other man said some nasty things to Okita-san, but one of them was right. He could barely stand up. He was in no condition to fight, no matter how much he wanted to. So the other man just sneered at Okita-san and then he left, right out the window."

"Did he do or say anything else before he left?" Saitou questioned,

leaning forward slightly, as if he were struggling to resolve an image that had very nearly come into focus.

Kazuki turned her face away.

"He smiled at me again," she said. "It was a terrible smile. I didn't like receiving it."

"And then he went out the window?" Saitou confirmed.

She nodded, then added, "And then Okita-san fainted. You got there very soon after that."

Saitou frowned, and she could imagine what he was turning over in his head. If he had arrived at the inn only a few minutes sooner, the outcome of the second floor battle might have been very different, not because his swordsmanship was superior to Okita's but because with the two of them shoulder-to-shoulder, they could have pushed back the monstrous man, no matter how overwhelmingly powerful he might have been.

But Okita's injury wasn't Saitou's fault, and surely he knew that. He and the third troop had arrived at the inn as quickly as they could, after Yamazaki delivered word to them.

"You're sure you didn't know the man who fought Souji?" Saitou's question was both abrupt and intense, and she looked up startled to find that he was leaning forward slightly, searching her face for the truth.

She flushed and then shamefully shook her head. "I'd never seen him before. He was very memorable. I don't think I'll be able to forget him, no matter how much I may want to."

"You may not have seen him before," Saitou admitted calmly, "But I am certain that he has seen you before. Everything you have told me leads me to believe that he ascertained your identity during the fight at Ikeda. That may have been one of the reasons that he decided to leave peacefully."

At this _alarming _bombshell, Kazuki could no longer maintain her composure and leaned forward in surprise, planting both her hands flatly on the ground in front of her as she cried, "It's not possible."

Her movement of pure distress left her nearly nose to nose with him, but her alarm was so great that she took no notice of her new position.

"I think it is possible, and given the information, even likely," Saitou answered her calmly, as still as a statue, since his seiza left him with no way to retreat from her easily. Her closeness caused the color to rise to his cheeks and he was grateful that she was distracted enough not to notice as he tried to regulate his quickened heartbeat, and keep his voice even and steady. "There may be another explanation that fits these facts, but I have yet to arrive at it."

She hung her head, and this granted Saitou some respite from the closeness of her face, but he instead found the length of her dark

hair tumbling forward against him from her topknot ponytail. After a moment of intense sensory input, he very carefully gathered all her hair in one hand and then swept it back over her head and let it fall gently down her back.

She looked up as she felt his hand in her hair and he froze momentarily, his hand still extended over her shoulder, where he had let her hair fall.

But her expression was confused, not accusatory, and he relaxed and let his hand fall to his side again as she sat back on her feet, clearly troubled.

"Do you think my father is with the Choshu?" Kazuki asked quietly as she struggled with this uncertain revelation.

"I have no way of knowing, at this particular moment," Saitou answered frankly. "Nor do I have any concrete proof that the man Souji fought recognized you. I have simply told you my opinion of the situation."

"Somehow, just the idea that that man knows who I am is terrifying all by itself. I don't want him to know who I am. If he knows who I am, I'm afraid he'll come looking for me again," Kazuki shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, despite the heat of the day.

Saitou picked up his sword and stood, as he apparently considered their interview over. He offered her his hand, as he had that night months ago when she crouched in the mud in the middle of an alley massacre, and she was comforted, as she had been comforted then. She took his hand, and he helped her to her feet.

"There is one thing that is certain about the identity of your monster," Saitou said as he moved past her toward the door.

"What is it?" she asked, wondering what other secrets he had divined from her story of the night of the raid.

Saitou paused at the door to look over his shoulder at her, and his eyes were the same color they had been in the moonlit alley, as blue as heaven, as blue and bright as a sootless flame.

"He is an enemy of the Shinsengumi," he said, and then he turned away from her.

She thought he meant to leave then, but he paused again, with his back toward her, and he spoke a little haltingly.

"If you'd like to bring me flowers in the future," he said quietly. "Then feel free to do so. I don't hate them."

And then he had slid the door open and was gone through it.

* * *

><p>The early afternoon found the two of them having mostly accomplished the necessary prerequisites for Okita's treatment. Kazuki had been to see Inoue and he had given her the box and the rice bowl that she required. Saitou had, as per her directions, filled the box with soil from her garden. At last she went and

collected the final and most integral piece of the treatment. With Saitou carrying the box, the bowl, and another pair of cucumbers bound by a wet string, and she with the lynchpin of her plan cupped protectively to her chest, they went to see Okita.<p>

He was sitting up in the corner of his room, leaning against the wall, and watching the courtyard through the open door. Although she could see him well enough through the open door, she went ahead and politely called out her intentions to enter. He lifted a hand to idly wave her in without paying much attention to her, as he often did. Saitou entered the room after her, and setting down his burden on the floor near the door, he closed the door behind him. Then, as she had advised him previously, he crossed the room to close the door to the courtyard as well.

His view of the outside world cut off, Okita at last focused his attention on the two of them, mildly perturbed.

"What is this, a meeting of the black cowl society?" he asked dubiously. "Are you both involved in a secret plot to retrieve Hijikata-san's book of awful poetry? If you are, then you're out of luck, since I don't have it this time."

This caused Kazuki to pause, the small bundle still cupped to her chest. She looked quizzically at Saitou, "Does Hijikata-san like poetry?"

Saitou did not have a chance to respond, because Okita shrugged, a brief movement of his body, an attempt to convey his attitude without moving his muscles and causing undue pain and stress. "You'd think he hated it, considering how he writes it."

Saitou frowned, and then said, "I do not have a great deal of experience with poetry, so I cannot comment."

Okita rolled his eyes, as if he had expected as much from Saitou, "That's a diplomatic response. That's the best indication of the truth right there, Kazuki-chan. Not even Hajime-kun is willing to defend Hijikata-san's poetry. _That_'__s __how __bad __it __is__."

Apparently feeling as if he were being disloyal to Hijikata by failing to defend his aesthetic sense, Saitou cleared his throat. "Souji, we didn't come here to discuss the Vice Commander's poetry," he said gravely.

Kazuki brightened, distracted from the consideration of Hijikata's poetry by Saitou's prompting. "Ah, no, we didn't come to do that," she agreed. "We've brought you a present."

Okita looked past her to the small pile of objects at Saitou's feet.

"Cucumbers, a box of dirt, and an empty bowl?" Okita asked dryly. "I can't think of anything I wanted more."

"No, no, Okita-san," Kazuki laughed, protesting, "It's a - "

At that moment, the bundle in her hands got tired of being held against her chest. A small, curious face appeared, with large blue

eyes and a small pink nose, and then this face turned into an expanse of pink as it opened its mouth and let out a high, squeaky cry.

"It's a kitten," Saitou finished seriously, as if Okita might possibly be unfamiliar with so strange and eldritch a creature.

"It's your kitten," Kazuki agreed affably, and held out her hands bearing the small squirming bundle toward Okita. "Her name is Momo."

As if mesmerized, Okita reached out to accept the small wriggling kitten, who was colored like a little spot of sunshine, somewhere between gold and red, with little white toes. She was a small kitten, no more than eight weeks old, and she still moved with the uncertain vigor of a toddler, full of energy, but lacking in coordination. As soon as Okita sat her down in his lap, she began trying to crawl up his kosode.

Partly distracted by the kitten attempting to climb up his chest, Okita attempted to protest.

"The last thing I need is a kitten!" he was saying, trying gamely to pry her off his kosode and put her back into his lap. "If you want to get me a present, get me a bottle of sake or something, not an obnoxious little bundle of trouble. This one needs more looking after than you do, Kazuki-chan," he complained, and then he began to pat himself over, because the kitten, having been persuaded from trying to climb up his kosode, had instead climbed inside his kosode.

"But Okita-san," Kazuki began, clasping her hands in front of her chest in a sign of penitence, "Momo-chan's mama has abandoned her, and I don't have enough time to look after her. She only needs someone to look after her for a few weeks, until she's old enough to look after herself."

Saitou lips thinned upon hearing this entreaty, and he interrupted her, "That is - "

She shot him a look, out of Okita's line of vision, that indicated he had best agree with her utterly fabricated story.

"Entirely the truth," he finished flatly.

He had been with Kazuki when she had collected Momo from her well-mannered cat mother, but Okita need not know the real circumstances of the kitten's birth and upbringing if Kazuki indicated that he should not know. Saitou was not a doctor, nor had he any medical training. This kitten was some sort of treatment that Kazuki had devised, and if it took a little sugar coating for Okita to agree to it, then so be it. Although Saitou did not relish falsehoods, sometimes they were unfortunately necessary.

"You will do me this favor, won't you Okita-san?" Kazuki asked, pleading. "Just for a while, look after Momo-chan? I promise to help with feeding her and cleaning up after her. You just have to be her babysitter for a while."

Okita had finally succeeded in pulling the kitten out of his kosode,

and now she had wrapped her small legs around his hand and was licking his fingertips enthusiastically, all the while purring contentedly.

Okita, still distracted by the kitten, attempted another protest, "But I can't keep her here in my room. Nobody in the Shinsengumi keeps pets. I'm not an old woman - "

"Kondou-san has already given permission," Kazuki insisted reassuringly. "Momo was born here in Yagi House, and Kondou-san said that if she lived here already, it really didn't matter which part of the house she lived in."

"That does make sense," Saitou agreed seriously. This was the part of Kazuki's argument that had impressed him the most. It was quite logical and straightforward, and therefore very appealing to the third troop captain.

Okita's attention had been drawn fully with the mention of the commander's name, and his wall of defense seemed to be wavering as he asked, "Kondou-san really said it was all right?"

"Of course he did," Kazuki nodded emphatically, "Kondou-san wants to see Momo-chan grow up to be a splendid cat as much as I do. So please do us both a favor and look after her for a while, Okita-san."

Okita tilted his head to the side, and then looked down at the small kitten, who was now chewing on his thumb and said haltingly, "All right. If it'll help Kondou-san out. But only for a while, understand?" He asked Kazuki, but the question seemed rhetorical as he did not wait for a response, but looked down at the kitten who was still chewing on his thumb, "Understand, Momo-chan? This is only a temporary arrangement. It's not permanent."

The kitten did not seem to be terribly interested in what Okita decided. She was content to sleep on his lap, to crawl up his clothing, and to chew on his fingers.

"She likes you," Kazuki announced happily.

Okita looked up with one eyebrow raised, and his smile was sardonic. "Because she's lame-brained, like another girl I know."

Kazuki smiled in response, because she had become accustomed to these sorts of remarks from Okita. She really didn't mind what he called her, so long as it made him happy, and with the small kitten climbing around in his lap, she was certain he would be, no matter what sort of false protests he might make. Momo was small and warm and alive, and needed caring for and, more importantly, playing with, which was just the sort of thing that Okita needed to help occupy his attentions while his physical activities were so limited.

Pleased that her treatment had been so well-received, Kazuki busied herself explaining the box of soil, and rattled off a schedule of when Momo would be fed. Saitou put the box of soil near the exterior door, and the empty bowl near the interior door, and then at her direction, he went off to fill it with cool water from the well.

As he watched the kitten crawl so actively around his lap, Okita remarked casually, "He's really at your beck and call, isn't he? It's

not something I would have predicted six months ago."

Kazuki flushed and found herself staring awkwardly at the floor. "Saitou-san is very kind to help me whenever I need it. I know I shouldn't take advantage of his good nature, but I've really come to depend on him."

"Hnnn," Okita murmured, wriggling his fingers so that the kitten jumped after them. "I wouldn't worry yourself overly much. Saitou lives to be of service," Okita finished cryptically.

Saitou returned with the water for the kitten's bowl, and the three of them talked for some time while Okita played with the kitten, or stroked her fur. Kazuki listened to Okita and Saitou discuss the incident at Akebono-tei, and then was pleased to see Okita eat both the cucumbers she had brought to him. He offered the end of one to Momo, and while she batted it around on the floor happily for a while, she was ultimately uninterested in eating it, despite the fact that Okita crooned to her that it was delicious and would help her grow up to be strong.

At last, Saitou excused himself, as he had duties to attend to. Kazuki hurriedly bowed to Okita and excused herself to follow him, and the first troop captain was left stroking the warm fur of his sleeping kitten.

* * *

><p>At the edge of the courtyard, near the little garden that Kazuki still tended dutifully, Saitou paused thoughtfully.<p>

He seemed to be thinking on what to say. Finally, he said, "That was well done."

Kazuki flushed a little in response, unused to being praised by one as reticent as Saitou. "Ah, thank you, Saitou-san. Everyone is so busy, I just don't want Okita-san to feel lonely."

There it was again, the spare, slow smile that she had learned to watch for, like a vision of a faraway paradise.

"I don't see how he possibly could."

And then he had excused himself, and was gone on his way.

End
file.